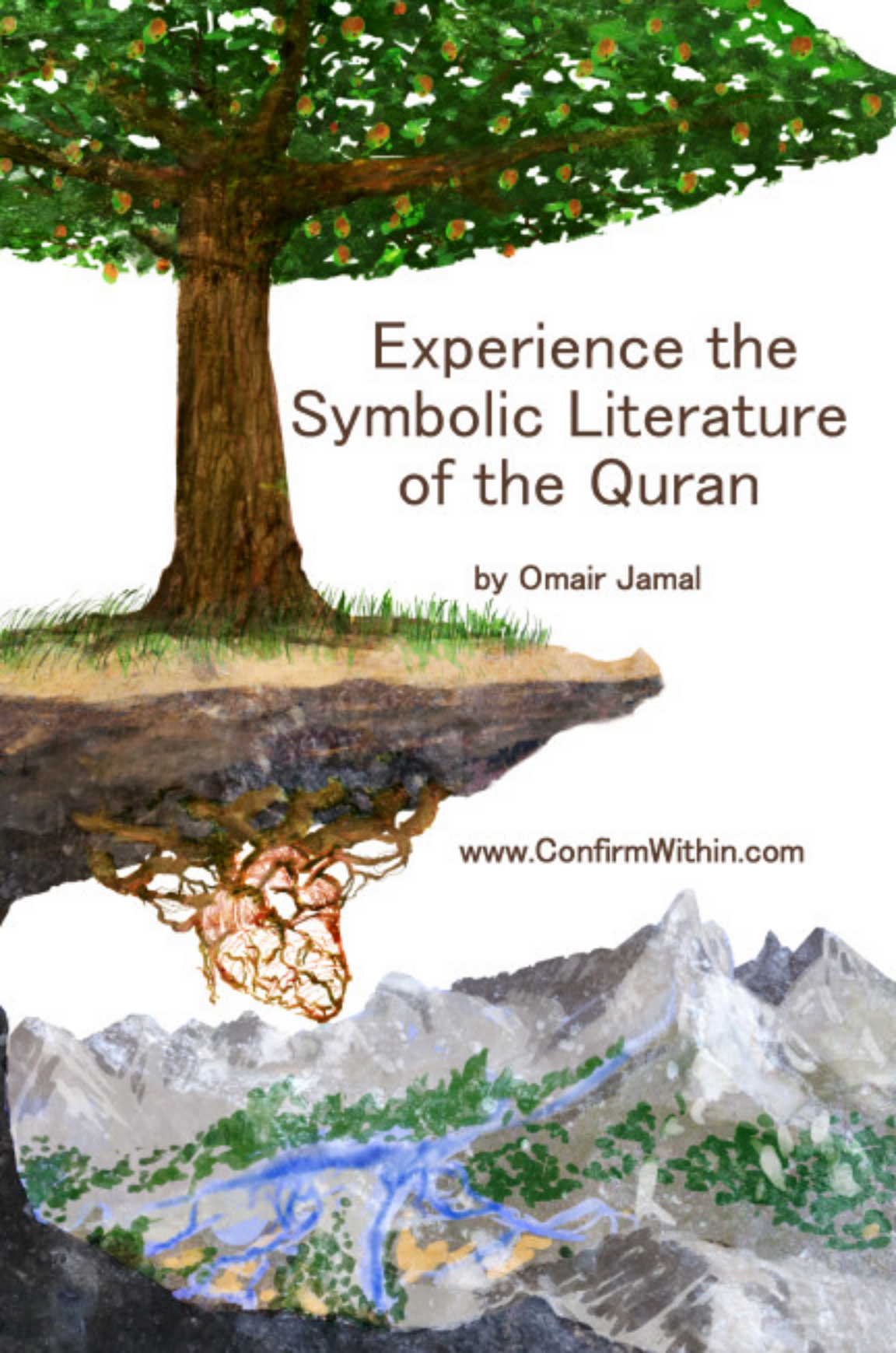
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Chapter 1 Introduction

Let's take a journey to another dimension of the Quran. What if this wonderful book that we read with reverence and recite with charming rhythm had two types of verses? Not one, but two different categories? In chapter 3, verse 7 of the Quran we're told just that.[1] One set of verses is about laws and religious duties, such as prayer and fasting, while the other set is symbolic and figurative, like the verse about a "garment of God-consciousness."[2] These verses take a little more thought, and their purpose is to engage our minds and help us grow—it's divine teaching at its best![3] Being conscious of God is a state of mind, and it isn't clothes that we wear like a garment. So what could this Quranic symbol mean (stay tuned and read on to Chapter 2: Symbolism, for an answer)?

Let's get back to the two hemispheres—I mean verses—of the Quran. These verses have their own names in Arabic: the verses about laws are called *muhkamat* and the figurative verses are called *mutashabehat*. One of the wonders of the Quran is its beautiful, dare I say magical, parallels with nature. It's as if everything in nature is reflected in the Quran, and everything in the Quran is reflected in nature. *We should expect this kind of consistency if the author of nature and the Quran were one and the same*. From my research, this observation has proved true time and time again. There's even a verse making that statement:

> We shall show them our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it is clear to them that this [Quran] is the truth [. . .] (41:53).

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1. The chapter and verse numbers will be separated by a colon from here on out. So chapter 3, verse 7 will be written as 3:7.

2. See 7:26.

3. See Appendix A for more detail and verses explaining this.

When we think deeply about the signs on the horizons (i.e., nature) and within ourselves, Allah will show us through all the evidence of the heavens and the earth and all the evidence in the Quran that the two mirror and reverberate and harmonize with each other, as if Allah used the very trees in nature as pens and the oceans as ink to write the words of the Quran.[4]

The Quran is made for the human brain. That you know. The human brain is made for the Quran. That you didn't know? Well then, let's explore! The brain has two hemispheres. We know that too. The Quran has two types of verses. We just learned that a smidgen ago. If we look at how the brain deals with language, notice that the left hemisphere recognizes the *grammar and laws* of arranging words while the right hemisphere is more attuned to the *emotional meaning* of language through the rhythm of sounds.[5] Aha! In this duality is something astounding!

Not only do the brain and the Quran have two parts to their setup, but their functions mirror each other![6] One part of the Quran, the *muhkamat*, deals with laws just like the left hemisphere, while the other part, the *mutashabehat,* deals with abstract things like allegories and figurative language, much like the more abstract concept of emotion that the right hemisphere helps with. Can I get an "Ameen"?

When you have two things residing in the same place, you inevitably end up with balance. There's a balance in our anatomy

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4. You've probably heard an expression similar to this one somewhere before. If you're having trouble recalling it, don't worry. You'll see its actual context soon enough.

5. Carl Zimmer, "The Big Similarities & Quirky Differences Between Our Left and Right Brains," *Discover Magazine*, April 2009, accessed March 14, 2015.http://discovermagazine.com/2009/may/15-big-similarities-and-quirky-differences-between-our-left-and-right-brains

6. At least in terms of how the brain deals with language.

between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, and there should just as importantly be a balance in how we read the Quran. Let's appreciate both types of its verses. We are a "community of the middle way" after all (see 2:143). One of the goals of this book is to help you read the *mutashabehat*, the other hemisphere of the Quran. And what a beautiful goal indeed!

I'm not just saying the *mutashabehat* are a source of the Quran's beauty based on personal opinion. Allah says so himself:

> We have revealed to you the most beautiful message, a book that is allegorical [*mutashabehan*] and repeating [...] (39:23). [7,8]

What's so beautiful about the allegorical verses? Let's take a look at one and see for ourselves:

> Had We sent down this Quran upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and split apart from fear of God. Thus do We provide examples to mankind so they may reflect (59:21).

Not only is this verse allegorical, but it tells us the purpose of the allegory: for us to reflect. Thinking about the symbols and allegories in the Quran, seeking their deeper meaning, allows us to experience the Quran's beauty firsthand. It engages our minds and sparks our imaginations. Imagine the magnificence of a mountain, the largest, most breathtaking, and most dominant structures on land. Yet even these split apart and crumble from their humility and fear of God. Now contrast this with the hearts of some people that are so hardened and sick, so full of arrogance, that no amount of truth penetrates.

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7. *Mutashabehan* is an adjective form of *mutashebehat*.
8. In Arabic, the word *ahsan* used in this verse can mean both "best" and "most beautiful."

Allah teaches us through the symbols in nature and the Quran.[9] Everything in our existence is connected: from the way a good tree with good roots produces wholesome fruits to the way that a good person with a good heart produces honorable deeds. When you see how the many symbols in the Quran connect with each other and how they connect to the symbols in nature, you begin to breathe an awareness of the beauty that surrounds us. Symbols and allegories help you see the beauty in nature and appreciate it so much more in the Quran.

Before we move on to the rest of the book, there's one more introductory note I'd like to share: "In this Quran We have provided an example of everything for humanity, but man is quite contentious" (18:54).[10]

What is one of the things this verse is talking about? The Quran can be loved by everyone from any background because the examples in it apply to everything. The Quran connects to every field in such a miraculous way that a psychologist or social reformer, a lawyer, or poet could all find it speaks to them in their respective expertise and fall in love with it. This book is all about discovering the literature of the Quran as this author approached it from that background. Each chapter covers a basic literary element, like symbolism or idioms, then explores how to experience it in the Quran. May God provide you some wholesome and hopeful benefit from reading this book! Can I get an "Ameen"?

9. See Appendix B point 1 for why God, the English translation for the word Allah, is used mainly in this book.

10. The Quran translations used in this book are modern English versions translated by the author. See Appendix B point 3 for more information.

Chapter 2 Symbolism

"What's *symbols* got to do with it?" Besides adding a nice "tssshhhhh" sound to a drum beat, what else do they offer? Am I thinking of cymbals, the metal plates on a drum set? I was wrong, right? Let's pretend this paragraph didn't happen.

Symbols, the ones in literature, stand for something more than what they literally are. Think about a dove. It's literally a bird, yet somehow it stands for peace. There are so many symbols in the Quran, but let's start with an example covering the symbolism of garments:

> O Children of Adam! We have given you garments to cover your shame and as an adornment. But the garment of God-consciousness [*taqwa*]—that is best. These are among the Signs of God so people may benefit" (7:26).[11]

The garment of God-consciousness/*taqwa* is the symbol here. Why? Because you can't wear *taqwa* like you can wear a shirt. But when you appreciate the symbolic meaning of garments, that they protect us and are adornments for us, we can smile from ear to ear at the beautiful meanings symbolism points us to: just like a garment, taqwa protects and beautifies the one who "wears" it. Reflect on that!

Realizing that a symbol exists in the Quran is superb, but you won't be left speechless until you explore that symbol's connections. Our symbol is about garments. Are there any verses that are related to garments? We're in luck. Just a few verses before 7:26, we see:

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11. *Taqwa* is the Arabic word for being aware and mindful of God, so the word "God-consciousness" is often used as its translation.

> Then [Satan] misled them through deceit. When (Adam & Eve) tasted (the fruit) of the tree, their shame became apparent to them and they began covering themselves with leaves in the Garden (7:22).

Did you notice something? We know that taqwa protects us and covers our shame like a garment, and in this verse, Satan misled Adam and Eve and they became naked. What did they lose that exposed their nakedness? They lost their garment of taqwa! This is what left Adam and Eve naked and vulnerable, exposing their shame.[12]

Adam and Eve's nakedness via the "original sin" of eating from the tree is in the Bible too, but the deeper understanding we have comes from the symbols placed so conveniently side by side in the Quran: 7:22 mentions their nakedness and 7:26 mentions the garment of taqwa! The Quran was written by our Master Teacher: God is certainly the greatest!

Let this beautiful symbolism be a divine warning. Do not let the embodiment of evil, Satan, strip us of our garment of God-consciousness, leaving us naked, vulnerable, and exposed to our lower nature, but let our garments be a source of protection and beauty. Wow! The Quran is marvelous indeed! And I do believe another Ameen is in order.

As a side note, most Christians believe that the original sin was so tremendous that God came down as a man in the form of Prophet Jesus to sacrifice himself and forgive humanity. In the Quran, however, we know that the original sin came about by our progenitors losing their taqwa. The purpose of this life—and the only way to earn God's

12. A friend mentioned this beautiful connection to me. Its credit is due to the deep-sighted Imam Warith Deen Muhammad.

forgiveness—is to wrap that beautiful garment of taqwa ever so tightly around ourselves.

What other Quranic symbols can we think of to treat our taste buds? The Throne, the Garden, milk, and rain. Other less pleasant symbols are the Fire, the pig, and the donkey. God's throne is mentioned in many verses so let's review it. Before we begin, it's important to remember that this verse is a bit mutashabehat, meaning God does not need a throne to sit on because he does not have a body to sit with. With that said, what do we know about thrones? A throne is used by kings and queens; all the images that you can associate with thrones help in our interpretation of this symbol. What do you think it symbolizes? I see it as a symbol of power, majesty, regality, and authority.

Okay, so we've imagined a throne and considered its symbolic oomph. Let's think about the other places the word throne is used in the Quran and how its symbolism can apply.

In 2:255, God says that his throne extends over the heavens and the earth. This literally means God's throne is enormous, but what do we learn through its symbolism? It can mean that everything in the universe is subservient to God and that his majesty is behind the beauty of the cosmos. What else do you make of it?

Another awesome verse concerns Prophet Solomon and the Queen of Sheba:

> [Solomon] said: "Oh Chiefs! Which of you can bring me her throne before they arrive in submission?" (27:38).

If you are not familiar with the story, Prophet Solomon called the delegation of the Queen of Sheba to his palace, and also had her

throne brought to him without her knowing. Remember what the throne is; it's a symbol of authority. So what does it mean that *her* throne was brought to *his* palace? One meaning is that her authority would now be under his. This is what happened, by the way; her kingdom came under his! Do you see how the Quran is so beautifully connected?

Symbols are also used to foreshadow. Foreshadowing is when you hint at some future event (there's more on this in the Foreshadowing chapter).[13] Queen Sheba's throne in the Prophet's palace also hints at their marriage to be! Take a moment and think about that. Now that's a true work of art! Take the reins and reflect on the Quran. You can't say God isn't looking out for us—he is constantly teaching us if we put in the time to think!

Here's a verse with many layers of symbols. Be forewarned. This may get a little heavy:

> With Him are the keys of the unseen, of which none have knowledge except Him. He knows what is on land and in sea. A leaf does not fall, nor does a seed exist in the darkness of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry, but all of it is in a clear record (6:59).

What symbols do you see? A "leaf falling" is a symbol for death because once it falls from the tree, it's dead and decomposes. The "seed in the earth" is a symbol for life. The "fresh or dry" is an analogy for young and old, life and death. The verse is saying that no one knows when or where anything will die or when it will spring to life, except God who holds the keys to the unseen.

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13. Yikes! This mention of foreshadowing is foreshadowing the chapter on foreshadowing! I'm getting pretty good at this!

Whenever you come to a conclusion about a verse, you should find supporting evidence to make sure you're actually on the right track. This is easy to do—if your conclusion is sound—because the Quran is wholly consistent! Let's look for similar concepts to the conclusions we've made above.

The "seed in the earth" is mirrored by the father's sperm in the mother's womb. Where's the evidence for this? In 2:223, God says, "Your wives are your field [. . .]," because a father's seed is planted into a mother's womb just like a farmer's seed is planted into a field of the earth. The earth really is a symbol for the mother's womb, and it's just amazing how the Quran supports this profound symbolism!

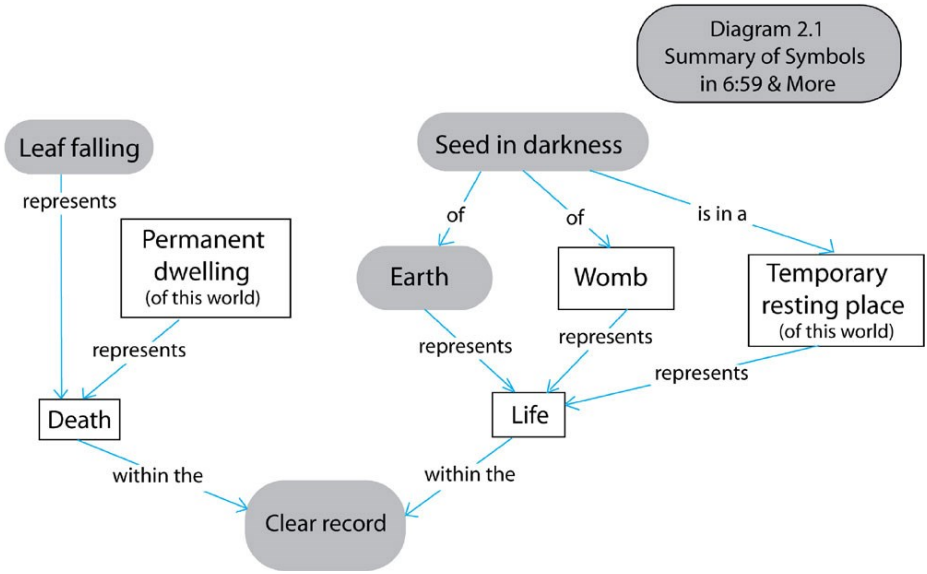
Here's the cool part: there are even more verses supporting what we've concluded above!

> [. . .] He creates you in the wombs of your mothers, stage after stage, in three (layers of) darkness (*zulumaat*) (39:6).[14]

Notice that the *seed in the darkness (zulumaat) of the earth* in verse 6:59 parallels the *seed in the darkness (zulumaat) of the mother's womb* in verse 39:6! I mean, really, I think now is a great time for an Ameen!

Take a peek at Diagram 2.1. This diagram and the next few paragraphs promise to clear all of this up a little more.

14. *Zulumaat* is the Arabic word for darkness. All words in Italics are the actual Arabic words written in English.



What about the "clear record" (*kitaab mubeen*) mentioned in 6:59? How does that figure into our conclusions about the symbols in 6:59? The "clear record" is said to contain knowledge of the falling leaves and seeds in the earth and the fresh and dry. The "clear record" is also mentioned in 11:6, where God tells us it records the *permanent* and *temporary dwelling places* for all, i.e., when and where it lives and dies:

> There is no creature on the earth except its sustenance depends on God. He knows its permanent dwelling and its temporary resting place. All is in a *clear record* (11:6).

We supported our conclusions of verse 6:59—that it speaks about the death and life of all things being recorded in a book—by analyzing all the symbols in it. Take another look at Diagram 2.1. Now that we've covered the "clear record" in detail, all of our symbols and their connections should be easier to follow.

Can you taste how sweet the journey through the Quran's symbolism is? The symbols truly are a source of its beauty (39:23).[15] Pondering them, seeking their deeper meaning, allows us to experience the Quran's beauty firsthand.

> Had We sent down this Quran upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and split apart from fear of God. Thus do We provide examples to mankind so they may reflect (59:21).

The verse above is confirmation that we should always put on our thinking caps and reflect upon the many symbols contained in the magnificent Quran. You will love this wondrous book more than you ever have before. How could you not? God will guide you. Seek his help, be honest, and put in the work!

15. We touched on this verse in Chapter 1. Flip back to it for a refresher.

Chapter 3 Figurative Language

Figurative language tickles me all over. It jumps out at me like a puma, and we run around like childhood friends. That's not weird. That's not weird at all. Because it's figurative.

Words don't literally tickle me, and they aren't really like a puma, and we don't run around together on the playground. That's the difference between figurative language and literal language. Figurative language is used all over the Quran and is not meant to be taken literally—not always. Why use figurative language if it's not meant literally? Why don't you just say what you mean? Because figurative language lets you communicate on deeper levels. If I said, "Bailey is strong," that's one thing. But if I say, "Bailey is as strong as an ox," that communicates on a more descriptive level that activates our imaginations. It sticks with us and we "get the picture"—pun intended (I'm having a lot of fun here if you can't tell).

There are three main kinds of figurative language. They are simile, metaphor, and personification. Remember the basics are really necessary so give me your ears. No, don't do that literally.

Similes make comparisons between two different things using the words "as" or "like." Not the valley girl "like," but like, this one: She jumped through the air *like* a gazelle.

In the Arabic of the Quran, some words equivalent to *like* and *as* are "*mithl*," "*ka*," "*kadhaalika*," and "*kamaa*." These words introduce similes so be on the lookout. Here's an example:

> It is He who sends the winds as bearers of good news, going before His mercy: when they have carried the heavy clouds, We drive them to a dead land, and make rain descend thereupon, producing every kind of harvest: thus ["*like that*"]

> shall We revive the dead: perchance you may remember (7:57).

Reviving a dead land is *like* reviving mankind when we have passed. That's a profound simile. You don't understand the resurrection? Well, you do understand a dry, barren land that transforms with the rains almost overnight into a vibrant, green paradise that's full of life. We've at least seen it happen on nature documentaries. This is the power of figurative language. It activates our imagination and lets the reader experience the discussion. It helps us relate to something totally abstract that we've never experienced, like being resurrected on the Day of Judgement. Remember, the signs in nature are there to guide us—if we reflect upon them. So start reflectin'!

I'd like to remind you that the Quran is connected. How connected? Supernaturally connected. Here's how. We've learned from the symbolism chapter that the land is a symbol for the mother's womb. Check. We also know about the simile of a barren land being revived. Check. This puts two interesting things side by side. If the land is the womb, then a barren land must symbolize a barren womb. So far so good? Let's apply this knowledge to the Quran. Is a barren womb mentioned anywhere in the Quran? Yes. We read of Prophet Abraham and Zakariya's wives who had barren wombs (19:5, 3:40). Remember how the Quran is supernaturally connected? Get ready for this. The barren wombs of these prophets' wives were also revived by God, just like the barren land is revived! Take a while to reflect upon that. The symbols connect everything in this glorious book. This is divinely inspired beauty!

These are all similes for our resurrection on the Day of Judgement, right? Can we uncover even more connections? Think about the children who were produced from these resurrected wombs: they were prophets who also taught people of the Resurrection on the Day of Judgement! It's like a pattern reflected within a pattern and

continuing indefinitely. This is the definition of a “fractal” pattern by the way. This is just a tiny example of the Quran’s connectedness! God bless this amazing book, and God bless me and you!

Let’s talk about metaphors, the second type of figurative language. A metaphor compares two different things *without* using “like” or “as.” Similes use “like” or “as”; metaphors don’t. That’s the main difference.

Metaphors are telescopes. They magnify the meaning of writing. Did you catch what just happened? I said “metaphors are telescopes.” I compared two different things, metaphors and telescopes, without using like or as! I used a metaphor right there when I was talking about metaphors. If you’re as excited as I am, then we’re both pretty weird.

What makes metaphors so powerful? Like similes, metaphors attach the characteristics of one thing to something else. Here’s what I mean. If I say, “his mind is a cloud,” then what do I mean? Think about what a cloud is. It’s intangible, up in the sky, but sometimes carries water. Through the metaphor I’m saying that the person’s thoughts are always floating in the sky, but sometimes they hold water! This is why metaphors are adored by writers. In just a few short stanzas you can communicate pages of meaning! In the case of the Quran, the pages of meaning are infinite.

A magnificent example of metaphor in the Quran follows:

> And if all trees on earth were pens and the ocean were ink, supported with seven more oceans, God’s words would not be exhausted. God is indeed Mighty, Wise (31:27).

Trees are metaphors for pens, and the oceans are metaphors for ink. The imagery here is beyond grand, but where do the metaphors lead

us? What do you infer? We'll come back to this in the inferences chapter.

Metaphors can take us deeper into God's message for humanity. Look at this verse:

> You cannot make the dead to hear [. . .] (27:80).

Living people are compared to the dead. In what sense could God be referring to these people as dead if not physically? What does it mean to be dead and what does it mean to be alive? Well, all life exhibits extremely high levels of order, and it takes tremendous energy to maintain this order. Being dead is the opposite. It requires no energy. If we apply this to the verse, then people who are "dead" are actually living on the lowest energy frequencies: they are dishonest, arrogant, and do harm, while people who are "alive" do what takes the most energy: they are honest, humble, and do good deeds. Let's be alive, brothers and sisters!

Personification is the last of the three types of figurative language. What does personification do? It looks you in the eyes and tells you how much you need it in your life. Personification gives human qualities to non-human things. What's the value of personification? It makes things easier for us humans to relate to. Saying, "the fly landed on my teacup" gives a much different sense than, "the fly rested its wings and joined me for a cup of tea."

When we read that "[God's] hands are outspreading," it is not meant literally since, "nothing is similar to [God]" (5:64, 42:11). He doesn't really have hands. The personification here helps describe God's generosity. In the Quran, personification does not always have a figurative meaning either. It can also take a literal one. When God says our body parts will speak on the Day of Judgement, that bit of personification is meant literally (36:65). Although, exactly how they will speak is not known.

The literal meanings of personification in the Quran do many things. They paint a more "living" world, connect the reader closer to this living world, and emphasize the Creator's supremacy. In the Quran, the mountains sing God's praises, rocks split from their awe of him, and even the heavens and earth speak (34:10, 2:74, 41:11).

Let's see how the literal meaning of personification connects us to nature and our environment:

> The seven heavens and the earth and all beings within sing His glory. There is not a thing but celebrates His praise, yet you do not understand how they praise Him. He is indeed Forbearing, Ever-Forgiving (17:44).
>
> There is not an animal on the earth, nor a creature flying by its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you [. . .] (6:38).

The literal: Everything is conscious, from the rocks to the mountains. Not only that, but every living thing forms communities like us; and just as we worship our creator, so does our environment, yet in a language we don't understand. This is gorgeous. Talk about a message promoting environmental stewardship and awareness. This is why the Quran mentions us as *khaleefas* on this earth, and it's also why we should take that title seriously.[16] We are supposed to be stewards of this planet, nourishers of this gift, which God has blessed us with. It's insightful how personification connects us like this to our environment.

Personification also emphasizes how supreme God really is. You could see that in the verses cited above. The following verse is another good example:

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16. When creating Adam, God tells the angles, "I will place a *khaleefa* on the earth" (2:30). *Khaleefa* means a successor or vicegerent and signifies humanity's role as stewards of the planet.

> Do you not see that everything in the heavens and everything on the earth bows down to God in worship: the sun, the moon, and the stars; the hills, trees, and animals; and multitudes from among mankind? But multitudes are (also) deserving of Punishment. Whomever God disgraces none can ennoble. Indeed, God does whatever He wills (22:18).

Everything bears witness that it's created by God. It submits to him and answers to him in truth. I hope that we can do the same!

Let's take a final look at a verse that epitomizes figurative language in the Quran. It's a journey into our imaginations:

> God is the light of the heavens and the earth.
> The example of His light is as a niche,
> In which is a lamp,
> The lamp in a glass,
> The glass as if it were a shining star,
> Kindled from a blessed olive tree,
> Not of the East nor of the West,
> Its oil nearly shines
> although not touched by fire—
> Light upon Light!
> God guides to His light whomever He pleases
> and strikes parables for mankind.
> God is knowledgeable over all (24:35).

From my little experience with photography, I know that lighting supplied from many angles leaves little room for shadows. And in the figurative language used here, there is literally light upon light. The lamp is encased in a glass. The glass itself produces light and beams like a star! A star whose light comes from blessed oil that also shines by virtue of its very nature. The lamp is likely lit by this oil, too.

Thus we have light upon light and no place for darkness to creep. By the way, it's interesting that there isn't any fire mentioned with these symbols. Blessing upon blessing is the parable of God's light. That's my take on it. More importantly, what's yours?

Chapter 4 Inferences

May I infer that you're shy? My inference is based on your manner, how you speak, and that you started blushing as soon as I asked.

Inferences are special because they let us come to conclusions that aren't clearly stated. A person doesn't have to tell you that they're shy. You can figure that part out by yourself. When it comes to books, inferences help us read more into a phrase than the words actually say. We're familiar with this concept. We've been using inferences in every chapter to understand what's being said beyond the surface. Inferences are how we "read between the lines."

"It's Ramadan and the sun is smiling on me." Is this sentence just talking about the weather and time of year? Or is the person speaking joyful and feeling the warmth of the holy month of Ramadan?

Making inferences isn't new to us, but the word *inference* probably is. Let's look further into the process of inference making. We know we need evidence, but what kinds of evidence can we use? Everything: when and where words are used, symbols, figurative language, dialogue, you name it.

Inferences can basically be made about anything using almost anything as evidence. But there's a difference between assumptions and conclusions, a weak inference and a strong one. I can assume that my daughter, who's only allowed two cookies a day, did not eat the entire box of chocolate cookies because she's "my little angel." If I stick to this assumption even though she walks past me with her head stuck in an empty box of cookies, then I can be sure I have myself a weak inference. I could also investigate by digging up more evidence of a cookie monster attack, like asking her to smile. Chocolate-smeared teeth make for great supporting evidence. Anyway, assumptions come from quick glances and weakly supported clues

that usually ignore evidence contradicting our position. Meanwhile, a strong inference is the opposite. It's based on many well-connected, solid details that all support the inference in different ways.

Here's a good observation from the Quran to get us started on making great inferences: God swears by the pen but never swears by the sword (68:1). This is very meaningful. You can only appreciate how meaningful it is if you make the inferences, though. So, what do you think? What are your inferences?

To make this inference, take into account the symbols used, just like we've been doing every time we've been reflecting on verses. In this case we have the pen and the sword. What does each symbol stand for? The pen is a symbol of sophistication, education, truth, and etiquette. The sword is a symbol of danger, power, and violence. From these facts very strong inferences can be made. God swears by the pen instead of the sword because he is teaching us that the pen is more powerful than the sword. We can also infer that God promotes education in Islam first and foremost, not violence, as the misguided assume.

Remember the metaphors in verse 31:27 about all the trees being pens and the oceans being ink, yet God's words will never be exhausted? Well, isn't the Quran God's words? It might take just one pint of ink to write all of it—not an ocean's worth. What's the inference? Although the ink runs dry after a pint, the meanings contained in the Quran's verses are infinite, which even oceans of ink could not satisfy. This is beauty atop beauty. Can you infer anything else from these metaphors?

Remember to support the inferences you make with as much evidence as you can. This is what separates a solid inference from a weak one. Here is another verse supporting the idea of infinite meanings in the Quran:

> In this Quran we have provided an example of everything for humanity, but man is quite contentious (18:54).

How can you have an example of everything in just one book? Easy. Because the Quran applies to everything through its symbols, metaphors, and universal principles. Remember that evidence is the ingredient of great inferences and keep thinking!

Chapter 5 Critical Thinking

Questions are at the heart of critical thinking. Sometimes I question why things have value. Most things have value because we have to sacrifice something in exchange for them, like time or money. There are few things in life more valuable than the truth, and the price for the truth, I've found, is a *sincere question*.

To ask questions is a sacrifice because when we question, we become vulnerable. These are some of the thoughts that prevent people from asking questions: "What if people think I'm not smart," "If I ask something that questions what so and so says, people may not like me," and so on. When you ask a question, other people may very well have these thoughts about you. But guess what? It doesn't matter. How people perceive you because you ask a sincere question, whether it's a good or bad perception, is a sacrifice you must be willing to make for the truth. Accepting the answers to our questions is another huge sacrifice because we might not like the answers we're given (by the way, God answers our questions when we call upon him—see 2:186).

Critical thinking is a doorway to the truth, and that's why it's so important. We pay to enter this doorway with our sincere questions.

Did you know that God promotes sincerity? Of course you do. If you're being sincere then you have to accept that at one point or another, you questioned the Quran's divine origin. Did you also know that God welcomes this question? Why? Because it is a sincere question. In the following verse God answers this very question by promoting critical thinking!

> Why do they not think about the Quran carefully? If it were from other than God, then they would have surely found many contradictions in it (4:82).

Now this is breathtaking. Yes, you may think about the Quran. Yes you may question its validity. But while doing so, make sure to think critically and study sincerely. Go through the whole book, and if it does have "many contradictions," then it can't be from God because God doesn't make mistakes. This is our proof. This is an answer to the sincere question. To me this is one of those impactful, far-reaching verses of the Quran! It not only tells you that thinking critically about the Quran is okay, but it encourages it. I haven't found contradictions in the Quran, but you have to research that for yourself.

How far do you take critical thinking? To truly be honest with ourselves, we can't just question the things outside of us, like what we read, hear, or see, but we must also question what's inside of us. No, not our intestines, because we won't get any answers out of them, but we should question *how* we think about things: our biases, oversights, assumptions, etc.[17]

The way we observe things really does affect our observations. Here's what I mean. If we have a bias, we tend to pick out things that confirm our bias and ignore things that disprove it. You may really, really like Aunt Jasmine, so you tend to focus on all the times she baked you cookies, instead of remembering all those times she put you in time-out. Someone else may really dislike Aunt Jasmine because she is from Kenya. Our biases can go unchecked if we operate on autopilot, going through our lives without critically thinking about our thoughts. "Is this person really bad because of where they're from? What if someone made judgments like that about me? What have my experiences with this person been like, and does that mean everyone from her country acts the same?" Critical thinking takes us out of stagnant places like bigotry and misguidance. It's part of our

17. Jennifer Duncan, "Critical Thinking," The Writing Centre, University of Toronto at Scarborough, accessed November 2, 2013, http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~tlsweb/TWC/webresources/terms.htm.

life's goal to learn and grow from the day before—or at least it should be.

It's only through critical thinking that we can realize that we're not as objective or reasonable as we first thought. Side note: critical thinking is a fancy term for being **honest**. This is a big deal, guys!

Let's read this example and apply critical thinking to make better inferences:

> Omar had enough of board meetings: the monochrome suits and ties, the dry-cleaned garments and dry-cleaned numbers, and the "official" nature of it all. He leaned back into his cold leather chair, allowing it to engulf him till he sank into oblivion. "I'd like to finger paint," he thought.

You make the observation that Omar isn't interested in numbers, so you infer that he isn't good at math and why he's so bored at the meeting. If you think critically about your thoughts, you have to ask yourself, "Does someone have to be clumsy at math to be bored out of their mind at a business meeting? Can he be great at math and feel the same way? Are the numbers Omar's main issue with the meeting?" It might be that you, yourself, aren't good at math, so instead of letting the evidence lead your inference, you let your bias lead it. This is absolutely important! Remember this as you make inferences about anything in life, but especially when reading the Quran.

Another person reading this passage could make an inference that, "Omar is having troubles at home." When he thinks about his thoughts, he gets an aha moment. He thinks, "Is this supported from evidence in the passage, or am I just making a huge assumption?" As long as you're thinking about the evidence and *how you are thinking about it*, critical thinking is doing its job. That's a lot of thinking!

The Quran has an example of everything, right? Is there an example about the importance of critical thinking? Look closely at these verses:

> And (remember) when (a group of Jews) said, “Oh Moses! We will never believe in you until we see God openly,” and thunderclaps seized you while you were looking on. We then raised you up after your death so that you may be thankful (2:55–56).

Now look at the following verse:

> And when Moses came to our place appointed, and His Lord spoke to him, he said, “My Lord, show me [yourself], that I may look upon you.” He said, “You shall never be able to see me, but look upon the mountain, if it abides in its place, then will you soon see me.” When His Lord revealed His majesty upon the mountain, He made it crumble (to pieces), and Moses fell down, fainting. When he regained consciousness, he said, “Glory be to you, I have turned to you in repentance, and I am the first of those to believe” (7:143).

Did you notice what just happened? When a certain group of Jews asked to see God, they were punished, but when Prophet Moses asked the same exact question, God actually gave him an answer instead of punishing him. What was the difference between the two scenarios: how they were thinking when they asked the question.

God is telling us to think about our thoughts before we ask—to analyze our intentions, biases, and assumptions. Prophet Moses’s intention was sincere when he asked to see God, but when that group asked, their intention was insincere; their bias in questioning was to “expose” the Prophet or God. If they had thought critically, thinking about their own thoughts, their motives would have become clearer

to them. This verse is teaching us that we must be honest, especially with ourselves.

Is there such a thing as an incorrect critically thought conclusion? Maybe. There are better-thought and in-need-of-more-thought conclusions. For readers of the Quran, the point is just to think honestly and critically. If we make a mistake, then recognize it and grow from it. It is okay to make a mistake. By being honest to your God-given morality, the knowledge of right and wrong that God placed in each of our hearts, you show a trust in God first and foremost.

"And He inspired in (every soul) its right and its wrong" (91:8).

You show that God is indeed sufficient for you. This is the message of our Prophet. It is when we reject our divinely inspired morality in favor of something else that we will be held accountable.[18]

18. See Appendix C for an additional note.

Chapter 6 Compare and Contrast

Fellow: “Hi. You have nice hair.”

Random passerby: “Oh, thanks.”

Fellow: “It’s the same color as mine, but I’m taller.”

(Short pause)

Fellow: “Will you be my friend?”

That’s how some of my conversations go. I use comparing and contrasting to break the ice when meeting new people. It doesn’t always have the desired result.

What does comparing and contrasting mean? When you compare, you explore similarities; when you contrast, you explore differences. We both have the same color hair—this is a comparison. I’m taller than you—this is contrast. These are simple tools that make more out of reading and also help me make new friends.

Much of the Quran presents us with comparisons and contrasts. Notice them in the following verse:

> Have you not seen how God provides a parable? A good word is like a good tree. Its roots are firm and its branches (spreading out) in the sky. It produces its fruit every season by the will of its Lord. God gives parables to people so they may benefit from the reminder. A parable of an evil word is that it is like an evil tree, uprooted from the earth, without a stable foundation. God strengthens those who believe with words that are firm in this world and in the hereafter. And God leads astray the wrong-doing. God does whatever He wills (14:24–27).

The symbolism and figurative language in this verse are keys to worlds of meaning. What comparisons and contrasts between the good and evil words and the good and evil trees can you make? Notice the similarities and differences. Use them as the basis for your inferences.

Let's start our path of discovery. The good tree has branches spreading out far. What effect could this have? Have you ever stood in the sun on a hot day, feeling it beat down on you, then stood under a tree? Didn't it offer you a welcoming coolness? Outspreading branches also provide homes for animals.

The good tree bearing abundant fruit is a metaphor for the good word. The many fruits are metaphors for all the blessings that a good word brings into the world. The fact that the tree has strong roots is a magnificent metaphor for the stability and strength that a good word embodies.

Now we'll apply a little bit of contrast. Only by looking at both descriptions of the good and evil trees side by side can we uncover implied meanings not stated in the verse openly. The Quran doesn't say what kinds of branches the evil tree has. It also doesn't say how many fruits the evil tree bears. It does contrast the good tree's roots as stable while the evil tree's roots are uprooted and unstable. We also know that *good* is the opposite of *evil*, right? We infer that the qualities of the good tree are the *opposite* of those of the evil tree. Let's use these points as solid evidence for inference:

Inference through contrast #1: The evil tree has few branches that aren't spreading out in the sky.

Inference through contrast #2: The evil tree has minimal to no fruit growing on its few branches.

Did you notice how much more we learned from this verse when we sat down and thought about it using “compare and contrast?” Let’s keep this up!

The more we think about the metaphors, the more we discover. The trees are metaphors for good words and the good actions of people. Let’s compare a little bit. What are all the similarities between a good word, a good person, and a good tree? Now compare an evil word, an evil tree, and the not-so-good actions of a person.

Anyone who believes in genuine goodness will produce good fruit, just like the good tree. His belief in good is like the strong root of the good tree. He will be a stable foundation, built with blessings, and a benefit to everything around him. Anything God sends his way will only increase his goodness, like rain sent upon the good tree: its branches grow longer and its fruit grows even sweeter. That’s right. Discover the literature of the Quran! Did I just hear another Ameen?

The purpose of the Quran is to help us grow personally. For example, in verses 7:59–7:96, we read of one community after another—Pharoah’s nation, Prophet Abraham’s people, ‘Ad, Thamud—each community kept rejecting the truth when it was brought to them. If we read the Quran passively, we will just read these as historical facts, and not apply them to ourselves.

How do we grow from reading the Quran? By comparing what we’re reading to our own behavior. Would we ever be like the communities of old? Do we blindly follow whatever our community says? If our community had firm traditions, some of which we know by our God-given nature to be wrong, would we stand up against these false traditions? If our answer is no, then we have a lot of growing to do. Those things that our community does that are right, are fine. But those that are wrong, which we know in the essence of our being as wrong, no matter how strongly these traditions are held, must be

strongly opposed. This is a test that God promises every human being. Do we worship the calf (see 2:92), a herd animal that is a symbol for the community, or do we worship God? We can't submit to our community first and foremost and pretend to submit to God.

Comparisons like these are alive because they apply to us personally, right now. That's the purpose of the Quran. These stories are reminders for us to grow as people. Do we behave like our role models, the prophets? Or are we like the other archetypes in the Quran that aren't good, like the pharaoh, or communities of the past? Do we act like these archetypes all of the time or some of the time? How can we improve? These questions are essential for each of us to grow. This makes the Quran food for our souls.

We've spoken a bit about comparisons. Let's talk more about contrasts. This is one of my favorite examples of contrast in the Quran:

> The blind and the seeing are not equal,
> Neither is the darkness (equal to) the Light,
> Nor the (coolness of) the shade and the heat,
> Nor the living and the dead.
> God indeed makes whomever He wills listen,
> But you cannot make those (interred) in graves to listen (35:19–22).

We're going to uncover some pearls of wisdom through these contrasts, so start your engines! In a debate between an atheist and a theist, Barker and Rajabali, Rajabali made a striking observation.[19] He talked about darkness and light. How light really exists but darkness only exists in light's absence. That makes sense. As the sun sets, darkness creeps in. But when the sun rises, it wipes away all the

19. "Theist Vs Atheist Debate: 'Does God Not Exist?' (Part 1/3)." Online video clip. YouTube. July 15, 2008, accessed November 11, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlaEPERULhc.

darkness. Heat and cold have the same relationship. Cold only exists in the absence of heat. Death exists only in the absence of life also. These are all contrasts referring to the *independent* and the *dependent*. Life, heat, and light are all *independent*. Death, cold, and darkness are all *dependent*. Follow the pattern in these contrasts, then read this verse:

> And say, "Truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Falsehood must indeed vanish." (17:81).

Make the connections. Notice that the same pattern applies here. Truth is what really exists. Falsehood only exists in its absence. Truth is independent, and falsehood is its dependent. Brothers and sisters, that is gorgeous! The Quran is set to maximum beauty! Why? Because truth is real and independent. No one can ever tell you that the truth is too complicated, or you can never know it. It is always possible because truth and falsehood aren't the same. One exists, and the other is just a shadow. This is affirmation from our Creator that you can always find the truth—no matter what—if you are sincere and put in the work, because falsehood always vanishes, and truth remains true.

How consistent is the Truth? It is consistent with everything else that's true, of course. What about God's names? They must be consistent with independence because God is independent. He is the true existence, and nothing would exist without him. One of God's names is *An-Noor*: The Light. Isn't independence a quality of the light that we just learned? Let's look at some of God's other names: The Living, The Seeing, The Absolute, etc. Not surprisingly his name is also *Al-Haqq*: The Truth! You probably get the picture. His names *all* correspond to things that are independent! Look at how consistent the Quran is! This is why there aren't contradictions in this beautiful book. It's a glorious, divine book!

The Quran led Rajabali to make these contrasts and connect everything so beautifully in his debate with the atheist because the Quran literally placed these contrasts right next to each other. Yes, God does teach us how to think through the Quran, and using comparisons and contrasts are a big part of his curriculum.

I hope you see how beautiful this wonderful book from the heavens is.

To close this chapter, let's look to *Surah Fatihah,*[20] *The Opening*, where we read a verse in our daily prayers all about comparisons and contrasts:

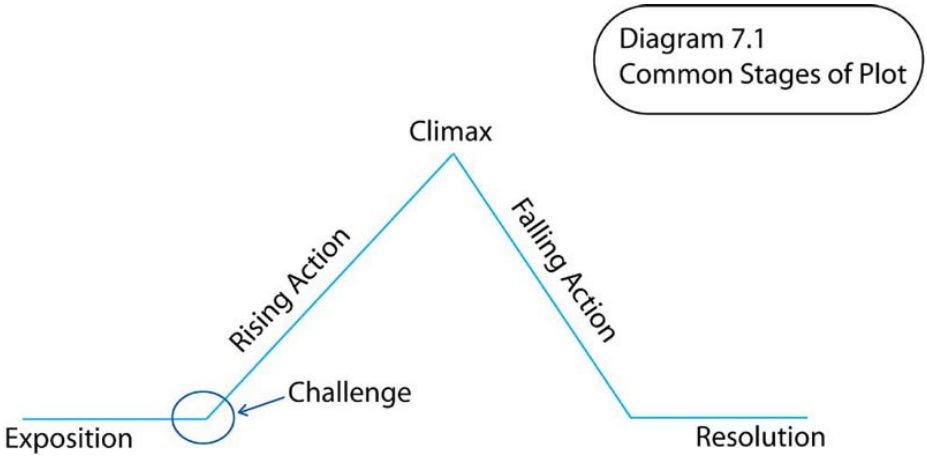
> Guide us on the straight path. The path of those whom you have guided, not of those who have gone astray, nor of those who earned your anger (1:6–7).

Something important to compare and contrast is the institutionalization of Islam and other religions. Be honest, infer, and think critically!

20. *Surah* is the Arabic word for a chapter of the Quran. *Surah Fatihah* is its first chapter.

Chapter 7 Plot

Every story has a plot. If it didn't, it would be plot-less (I couldn't think of a better description). A plot has a series of stages. See Diagram 7.1. Not every stage has to be included in a story, but these are the most common.



They don't have to be in order, either. There are many stories where the resolution, or ending, comes first. For example:

> All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpy back together again. What happened to him? One day, Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall . . .

The reader has to read the rest of the story to understand why events unfolded the way they did. I took some liberties with rewriting the nursery rhyme above.

What does each of the stages of plot mean? The exposition introduces the characters and tells you more about the story's setting. The setting is when and where the story is taking place. Here's a short example of exposition: "It was a bright and sunny day. My friends and I giggled as we ran around the playground. It was my 31st birthday."

The challenge of the story is what the main character has to overcome.[21] The challenge can be internal, like having low self-esteem, or external, like trying to squeeze into your favorite pair of pants. As a side note, in real life all meaningful internal and external challenges are best overcome through taqwa. With low self-esteem, a person seeks acceptance from others and does not accept herself. How can you not be confident in yourself knowing that the creator of the universe also created you? Anyway, let's get back to the story.

The climax is where all the action, suspense, and excitement of a story converge. Usually, many events in the story lead up to this critical point. Imagine our main character, Jamal, a hardworking, nice guy who's praying his *Jummua* prayer at the masjid.[22] He meets a sister, Aisha, who works as a teacher there. They like each other instantly. They want to get married, but he has to speak to her father first. After building himself up for the big day, he finally goes for it. He meets her elderly dad at his office. They exchange pleasantries. Jamal mumbles and loses his words. For a second he forgets which language to speak in. He asks Aisha's father for her hand. The father takes a deep breath and runs his fingers through his gray beard. His gaze penetrates Jamal's very being. Aisha's father finally answers, "You better ask somebody!" There's a long pause followed by uncontrollable laughter. Jamal wasn't laughing at all though. He didn't understand her father's pop-culture reference. You could see his face become a lifeless, pale color.

All the events that led up to the climax are called the "rising action," and right after the climax is a steep drop in excitement called

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21. In other books, you will see the "challenge" stage called the "conflict." "Conflict" has too negative a connotation, and the word "challenge" better represents this stage anyway.

22. *Jummua* stands for the Friday congregational prayer.

the “falling action.” The resolution is a key stage where the challenge is overcome and the story ends.[23]

We can use plot to make connections and analyze the Quran, just like we’ve done with symbolism and figurative language. Remember that sincere work leads to results. This works with the Quran too: sincere reflection leads to deep insight. For me, Prophet Abraham’s life is one of the most inspirational stories in the Quran. Would you like to gain more insights into it? Then let’s apply what we’ve learned about plot!

In verses 6:75–79, Prophet Abraham observed the stars, the moon, and the sun. At first, he said that each one was god, but then rejected each idea based on observation and thinking. He knew that, “My Lord does not set,” meaning that God doesn’t go away or come to an end. God is always present. If he did come to an end then everything in existence would end too. What challenge was Prophet Abraham facing here?

Not only did Prophet Abraham’s father worship idols, but he created them! The Prophet questioned him too. He asked him why he would worship something that is itself created. Why wouldn’t he worship the Creator of everything? His father disowned him. Prophet Abraham asked his entire community the same question. They responded in the same way. The Prophet’s plan to educate everyone was set in motion. He destroyed all the idols except the biggest, and the next day when the people asked him what had happened, he told them to ask the biggest idol, if their gods could speak (21:52–71). The people came to their senses, but soon went back to their unreasonable ways and tried to get rid of the Prophet. What was the challenge faced by Prophet Abraham here?

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23. Arthur N. Applebee et al., *The Language of Literature* (Evanston: McDougal Littell, 1997), 490.

The story doesn't end there. Prophet Abraham also questioned the arrogant king. The king was so self-absorbed that he believed he was greater than God (2:258). Attempts were made on the Prophet's life, but he was always saved by God. There are different events in Prophet Abraham's story, but the challenge he faces in all of them is the same: *shirk*. *Shirk* is the Arabic word for adding partners to God's divinity. Instead of worshipping God alone, other things like idols or people's own desires are worshipped.

How do all these different events in the life of Prophet Abraham share one, single challenge? When the Prophet looked upon the stars, moon, and sun, and concluded that none of these could ever be God, he kept his mind and heart pure from shirk. He didn't associate anything with his understanding of the one, absolute God. By questioning the wrongs of his father, he proved that he served God before he "served" his father. The Prophet didn't serve his community either. They were all steeped in a false tradition, but he stood resolutely against it. People who live on a lower level of consciousness do not question the "herd." They submit completely to whatever the heads of their communities say. Prophet Abraham purified himself of "worshipping" his community and worshipped God alone. But God will test us at every level of our lives, so the Prophet was also tested by the highest worldly figure of authority in our lives, the king. Prophet Abraham questioned the king's falsehoods too. Even if this meant death or whatever consequence, he proved his alliance to the truth firstly, time and time again, under every test God put him through. He proved that he worshipped God alone.

Isn't that amazing? If you truly say you worship one God, the Creator of everything, you will be put to the test. You will be tested by your desires, your family, your community, and your government, just like Prophet Abraham was. We may stand with any of these influences, as long as they're in harmony with the truth—at its most

basic, the truth is what's in harmony with the morality God inspired in all of our hearts. If these influences are against the truth, then we must stand against them to correct them. But will you? That is the test of anyone who says they submit to the truth. If you lived in the slave-states during the time of American slavery, would you help the oppressed, like the conductors of the Underground Railroad? Or would you go with the flow of your community?

Would you obey a command from a person or system that contradicts the clear truth God inspired in your heart? This is an important question we have to ask ourselves. Be honest with your answer. This verse refers to this elegantly:

> Oh you who believe,
> Be of those who stand firmly for justice,
> as witnesses for God,
> even if it be against yourselves,
> or your parents,
> or relatives,
> whether they be rich or poor—
> for God is nearer to both (as a protector)—
> So follow not your desires in lieu of being just.
> And if you pervert (the truth),
> or turn away therefrom,
> Then (know that) God is fully aware of all you do" (4:135).

This verse is the definition of beautiful. It gives me goosebumps and smiles simultaneously. This must have been written on a parchment of gold. It's hard to imagine that something so advanced came 1400 years ago. This verse says that we must speak the truth always. Whether it's against ourselves or our community, the rich, or the poor. We submit to the truth first and foremost, because we submit to God first and foremost.

Do you remember how we talked about the consistency of the Quran? Well, every challenge faced by every prophet was to clean away shirk from themselves and their communities. That's pretty consistent. The purpose of our lives is the same. In other words, our purpose is to serve One God, the Creator of everything (see 51:56).

What insights did we gain by analyzing the Quran using plot? We learned how big of a deal shirk really is. Some people associate their *nafs*, the primitive desires for pleasure and control, with God; some worship "the calf," a symbol for worshipping their community, instead of worshipping God; or some worship physical idols, including gold and money. All of these are a form of shirk. All negative outcomes germinate from that rotten seed of shirk. Basically, shirk is associating with *Al-Haqq* anything that is false.[24]

I've mentioned that you should stand for the truth. But you might ask, "Isn't the truth subjective? Everyone has a different understanding of what the truth is." That's true only on the surface. In reality, we all have a basic, objective knowledge of the truth, which God inspires in each of our hearts:

"And He inspired (the soul) as to its right and to its wrong" (91:8).

This truth transcends culture and society. This is the truth that tells us to feed someone that is hungry, not to harm ourselves or our children, to treat people, both friends and enemies, in a manner that we know innately as best. This truth may get ignored and suppressed, but it's there in all of us. How we apply this truth is judged by God on a one-to-one basis with each person on the Day of Judgement. God knows how much knowledge, wealth, or influence he blesses each person. He knows the difficulties each person went through. He is best to judge how we applied the truth.

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24. *Al-Haqq* is one of the names of God. It means "The Truth."

One aspect of shirk is to put what we know within our very being as wrong above what we know within our very being as true, because what we know within our souls as true is inspired by God himself. To submit to the truth with sincerity, Al-Haqq, one of God's beautiful names, is purity from shirk and the essence of tawheed.[25] That is beautiful. That is a message of the glorious Quran. Ameen!

25. *Tawheed* is the essence of Islam. It means submission to the one, incomparable God. Please read Surah Ikhlas, Chapter 112 of the Quran, for a greater definition.

Chapter 8 Theme

What is the theme? The theme of a story is its lesson, message, or overall idea.[26] How do you find the theme? Usually, you have to infer what it is because it's not openly stated. If only life were easy, and we didn't have to infer anything in the Quran! If it *were* like that, then God wouldn't be the greatest of teachers. Great teachers want you to understand, so you can apply your learning to any situation imaginable in your life. That is true education. By making us think about verses, God is developing our minds. If the Quran had every single idea stated directly with no reflection required, then it would promote laziness and mental immaturity. Thank God for God!

How many themes are there? There can be an inspiring theme in just a single verse of the Quran, or you may find a theme for an entire chapter. There are main themes and supporting themes. If the chapter's main theme is patience, then you may find supporting themes like forgiveness, compassion, and empathy throughout it.

What do you think the theme of this verse is?

> Give them an analogy: The life of this world is like water which We send down from the sky. The vegetation of the earth (grows) by mixing with it, but (ultimately) it becomes dry stubble, spread afar by the wind. And God has power over all things (18:45).

Pure water from Heaven mixes with the soil of the earth and produces life. Life grows green and lush, but soon withers and turns to dry twigs and leaves. Keep in mind the symbols and metaphors and you'll notice that this verse is also speaking about the progression of our lives from newborn to elderly. This is beautiful indeed. But what's the theme? I

26. Applebee, *The Language of Literature*, 227.

view it as nothing worldly is permanent, but God *is* permanent. We should reflect on this theme some more to squeeze extra droplets of wisdom from it. We should always strive for good in the world, but even still, all of this is temporary. Our true purpose is everlasting. It's earning the permanence of God's pleasure. The world is like a womb. It helps us develop into something. When we die, our real life begins. To focus on this stage of our life's journey as if it were permanent is a loss. Let's pray that we can make this temporary stop a much better place for everyone.

Here's a great technique to identify the theme of a story. Consider the major decisions of the protagonist (the leading role in the story). We can also consider his or her experiences or how major events in the story unfold. Are you ready to jump with both feet? Let's apply these suggestions to find the theme of Surah 12.[27]

When Joseph's brothers threw him into a deep well, God reassured him that the future would be much better for him (12:15). At what point in the future wasn't made clear, but Joseph remained patient and trusted in his Lord without complaining.

Joseph was discovered in the well by a travelling caravan; you would think this was the end of his troubles. He was saved from a well in the middle of a wild desert, but they actually sold Joseph into bondage. He was bought and became the servant of a wealthy Egyptian known as the *Aziz.*[28] That's a bit of good and bad news. Joseph was always patient. He endured whatever circumstance befell him with honesty, humility, and good deeds. When the Aziz's wife yearned to seduce Joseph, he ran from her, seeking refuge with God. Although Joseph was not guilty, he was actually accused of seducing her (12:23–26)! Joseph wasn't bitter. He wasn't ungrateful. He

27. This stands for Chapter 12 of the Quran, also called Surah Yusuf.

28. *Aziz* is most likely the title given to a person of high status in Egypt.

accepted God's supremacy and trusted in him. Joseph preferred to be thrown in prison than to stay in that home and succumb to seduction (12:33).

I have to pause for one second and share with you the similarities with this situation and the plight of the Africans, Palestinians, and other oppressed groups. They, like Prophet Joseph, were exiled from their homes. They are also blamed for crimes that are committed *against* them. They are also imprisoned, like Prophet Joseph: they're hemmed in by blockades and high prison walls, both figuratively and literally.

While in prison, Prophet Joseph was called a *muhsin* by fellow prisoners—a muhsin is one who does good (12:36). How is he called a muhsin? How could he even think of doing good for everyone around him when so many others in his position would be consumed with hopelessness and frustration? The secret is that he's serving God through his good deeds, and through this, he's actually doing good for himself in the process. As he feeds others, he is being fed on a spiritual plane. This is a figurative expression, so please don't misunderstand. We can imagine how Prophet Joseph chose to be charitable, selfless, and giving.

Prophet Joseph is patient and trusts in God. He is finally freed from jail because of his character and his interpretation of the King's significant dreams that predicted a famine (12:46–55). He's even awarded a position of power in Egypt.

Now, the story almost comes full circle. Prophet Joseph is given the position of a treasurer over stores of food. Lo and behold, his brothers come to him seeking to trade their wares for grain and corn (12:77). A few events transpire—you can read the surah for more details—and they called their brother Joseph a thief, not knowing that they were standing before him. In turn, the Prophet revealed who he

was, called them all to live in Egypt, and forgave them (12:92 & 99). Can you believe that? What would you have done if you were in Prophet Joseph's place?

So, what do you think the Prophet's decisions reveal about the theme of Surah 12? Prophet Joseph never let the darkness of others' behavior—all the people in his life that hurt him—affect the God-given light in his heart. Now this is a beautiful lesson for any oppressed person to strive toward, whether African, Native American, Palestinian or any other. The theme is to be patient and trust in God, to serve him no matter the circumstances. That is such a beautiful theme!

Did you think that the theme was something else? As long as you can support your theme with consistent evidence, then it's a great theme. For instance, if you found that mercy was the theme, you would still be right, I'd say. I believe patience to be the theme of this chapter because there's much more evidence supporting it.

If patience was the main theme, were there any subthemes in Surah 12? How about forgiveness, empathy, acceptance, and compassion? They all support the main theme of patience. Without acceptance, how could one be patient? Without compassion, how could one forgive? Being forgiving sure does help one be patient. Prophet Joseph forgave his brothers and accepted undeserved consequences time and time again.[29]

---

29. How could Prophet Joseph be so sublimely forgiving? The Prophet's forgiveness of others in the external world came from his internal development. For us to be more forgiving also, we must first ask God for forgiveness for the wrongs we've done to others and ourselves and next, we must deliberately forgive ourselves. We can never be forgiving to others if we cannot forgive ourselves for our wrongs. Here's why we shouldn't forget ourselves: "And do not be like those who have forgotten God, so he has made them forget themselves. (Indeed) those are the wicked" (59:19). When God makes you forget yourself, your own higher nature, you cannot be a source of good. This includes being forgiving to others. Remember God by asking for his forgiveness, forgive yourself, and then forgive others.

We've been discussing how consistent the Quran is, well, pretty consistently throughout this book. There's no reason that we should stop now. Since the Quran is completely connected, the decisions of others in the story should also support the main theme. I mean, it should since the Quran's consistency is divine!

Do you remember Prophet Jacob? He is actually Prophet Joseph's father. Prophet Jacob was so grieved by the loss of his son those many years ago when he was thrown into the well, that his eyes turned white from sorrow. Prophet Jacob actually went blind. However, the whole while, he had trust in God and faith that he would be reunited with his long-lost son (12:84). That is indeed patience on a prophetic level! They were reunited, and with that reunion, God restored his vision!

The story of Prophet Joseph is "the most beautiful of stories" (12:3) because it emphasizes the power of patience. As Prophet Jacob so elegantly put it, "[. . .] *Fa sabrun jameel*": patience is beautiful (12:18, 12:83).

By the way, there is a theme in the story of your life. What could it be?

Chapter 9 Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a clue that hints at some future event in the story. It's a very fun literary device—at least I think it is. It helps keep the story connected. By now, you can probably tell how much I love consistency. Here's an example of foreshadowing in action:

> When Booker left the supermarket, he realized that he had lost his driver's license. He strode impatiently back to the store and searched with purpose. Booker demanded that the manager check the lost and found. His ID was lost but not found. He checked every aisle except the one barricaded with yellow "*Piso Mojado*" signs warning of a freshly mopped floor. He skirted past them with abandon. Suddenly, he barreled backwards with a thud. The last things Booker saw were the bright lights of the supermarket ceiling beaming white into his eyes before everything went black. When he came to a few minutes later, and with a group of well-wishers standing over him, he heard someone ask, "Are you all right?"
>
> "Yeah, I think so."
>
> The manager rushed to him. "I'm so sorry. What was your name again?"
>
> "My name? My name is . . ." He couldn't find his name. He had lost his memory.

Did you notice the foreshadowing in this passage? When Booker lost his I.D., it foreshadowed that he would also lose his memory later in the story. That's pretty neat! Foreshadowing, like symbolism, figurative language, and the rest of the gang, is like glue holding the pieces of a story together. Nothing is mentioned by mistake and everything has meaning.

One of the most beautiful examples of foreshadowing is from one of the most beautiful stories of the Quran—and the Bible. It's the story of Prophet Joseph yet again!

In the beginning of Surah 12, Joseph mentions that he dreamt of 11 stars, the sun, and the moon all bowing down to him. His father, Prophet Jacob, urged him not to tell his brothers the dream, since his brothers were already jealous of Joseph. Read the surah and figure this one out. As the surah comes to a close, what happens? Did you notice what was foreshadowed?

The answer is in the surah itself, so you don't have to infer much. I love this example. This surah is beautiful on so many levels! Don't take my word for it! (I sound like the host of *Reading Rainbow,* don't I? It wasn't intentional, believe me! If you're too young to know what *Reading Rainbow* is, then that's a sure sign that I'm getting old.)

There's a similar plot that's repeated many times in the Quran. The people in the stories are different, but their behavior is almost identical, and the resolution is the same. In verses 7:59 to 7:96, there are many different stories of prophets mentioned. God sent Prophet Noah to his community, but he was rejected by most of them, and they were destroyed; Hud was sent to his people with the same result. Shuaib was sent to his community and so were Saleh, Abraham, Lot, and other prophets. The resolution to all of their stories is the same. What do you think the theme of all these verses can be? I think the theme is, "History repeats itself."

Knowing that the stories of the Prophets are guides for us, they have to apply to our lives too. How else could they guide us, right? Can the theme of history repeating itself foreshadow anything in the story of our lives? Will we repeat history like the communities of old? When we meet the truth, in any of its forms, like a realization to do what's right, do we accept it, or do we shirk it?

Chapter 10 Setting, Mood, and Tone

There are two elements in every story that hide behind veils and usually go undetected. You have to wear your inference goggles to spot them. These guys are called mood and tone. The setting is the third element we're discussing in this chapter. It also affects the mood and tone of a story, so why not group them into a single chapter? The setting describes the when and where of a story. Can you find the setting of this verse:

> If you do not help him [Prophet Muhammad], God will. (He did indeed help) when those who were ungrateful expelled him, (when) he was the second of (just) two, and they were in the cave (taking refuge), he said to his companion, "Do not be distressed for God is indeed with us." God revealed His blessed tranquility upon them, and strengthened them with forces you could not see. He made the word of the ungrateful most low, and God's word the most high. God is ever Mighty, Wise (9:40).

This verse is talking about a monumental moment in Prophet Muhammad's life: his migration from Mecca to Medina, where he was fleeing bounty hunters trying to kill him. Well, what is the setting of this verse? Where is it taking place? The setting is a cave. When is it taking place: during Prophet Muhammad's migration to Medina.

The mood of a work is the feeling it creates in the reader, but the tone focuses on the author's feelings—that is, how the author feels about what he is describing.[30] What is the mood of the verse above? For me it is constantly changing. At first, when I think of Prophet Muhammad and his friend, Abu Bakr, hiding in the cave from bounty hunters that are approaching, the mood is incredibly anxious. That's

30. Applebee, *The Language of Literature*, 1151 and 1158.

how I'm feeling. But when the Prophet reassures Abu Bakr that, "God is indeed with us," the mood changes to relief and joy.

Did you feel it? I did!

Did you just hear that? I sure did. It was an "Ameeeen!"

That's right. Let's keep it moving.

Since mood and tone are a bit on the touchy side, the connotation of words makes all the difference. Connotation isn't what a word literally means; it's the emotional baggage that a word carries. It's the feelings and ideas that certain words evoke in us.[31]

Let's say that you're taking a driver's test and the instructor is sitting beside you. After you park the car, she comments, "Your driving is acceptable." You're immediately happy and think you've passed! But what if she said your driving was "alright" or "okay?" Would that change how you felt about her comment? Now what if she said, "Your driving is so-so?" The connotation of "so-so" is much more negative than "okay." What takes the cake of negative connotations is if she said, "Your driving is *mediocre*." She just pulled out all the stop signs! Would you still think you passed the test? I would feel instant gloom if my driving instructor had that to say after I so carefully parallel parked for the very first time.

All of the words above have very similar literal meanings, but their connotations are dramatically different. Get to know the sensitive side of literature by thinking about the connotations of words and how they make you feel. This is a huge part of exploring the mood of what you read. What do you think the mood in this verse is?

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31. Denotation is somewhat opposite of connotation. Denotation is the literal meaning of a word.

> The example of the Garden promised the righteous:
> In it are rivers of water free of ever degrading,
> Rivers of milk whose taste is unchanging,
> Rivers of palatable wine for those who seek drink,
> Rivers of clear honey,
> For them is every kind of fruit,
> And forgiveness from their Lord [. . .] (47:15).

How does this verse make you feel? Look at the words and their connotations: honey, righteous, clear, milk, rivers, etcetera. I feel that the mood is serene and hopeful and it gives me a sense of satisfaction. Notice how the setting, mood, and tone are all linked. In the positive setting of the Garden and its flowing rivers, God's tone is just as positive, benevolent, and appreciative.

The second part of the verse is this:

> [. . .] Are they like those who abide eternally in the fire
> and given boiling water to drink that cuts up their bowels? (47:15).

When the setting is Hell, the mood and tone reflect that change. The reader feels fear and uneasiness. The connotations of fire, boiling water, and innards all in the context of Hell provoke angst and uneasiness. God's tone toward the inhabitants of Hell is just as negative.

If we change the setting, but use the same words, notice what happens. If boiling water and fire are mentioned in the setting of your Grandma's kitchen preparing tea, the mood is warm, loving, and comforting. When they are mentioned in the setting of Hell, it is something else entirely. Notice how setting, mood, and tone interact with each other while you read the Quran. You will gain a deeper appreciation of the verses you're reading.

Chapter 11
Static and Dynamic Characters

When something is static, it stays the same. When it's dynamic, it changes. Static and dynamic characters are good labels to help categorize people in stories, but these labels aren't always so clear cut. A character can be static for most of the story and then make a dramatic change at the end. Imagine a career-oriented woman working for years at a major corporation in bustling New York City who suddenly quits and moves to Morocco. She's a dynamic character because her behavior or outlook changes as the story progresses. A dynamic character can either change for the better or for the worse, so just because a character is dynamic doesn't always mean it's a good thing.

The caring mother, the hard-working father, the rebellious teenager. These are all static characters because they represent something called archetypes. Archetypes are the most typical examples of a symbolized person. That's a strange definition! Let's go over some examples. What do you think a grandmother represents? What does she symbolize? Wisdom, right? So the archetype would be "wise grandmother." What does a mother symbolize? Caring. So the archetype is "caring mother." All archetypes are essentially static characters. They always do what they're known symbolically for doing. Stereotypes also fit into this category.

In real life, we shouldn't follow most labels too closely. "Ex-con" is a good example of a not-so-good label. "He's an ex-con, so we shouldn't trust him," is what many people would typically think. This label doesn't mean anything. Someone without that label may do even more harm to us. We don't know the circumstances of an "ex-con's" conviction. He could have been innocent. And every human being makes mistakes. This person could have reformed himself after being

freed from jail. Prophet Joseph was also an ex-con by today's standards. Prophet Moses was too. He wasn't convicted, but he did kill a man in his past, albeit unintentionally. The best label that we should judge others by is "Creation of God." In literature, however, we're given a little bit more leeway.

In verses 18:31–44, we read of two men. One is blessed with two opulent gardens of fruits, rivers, and plentiful green. The other has little. The wealthy man boasts to his poor companion, "I have more wealth than you and more honor among men" (18:34). Then he continues his ingratitude toward God:

> I do not think this (abundance) will ever perish nor that the hour (of resurrection) will ever come. Even if it does, my Lord will grant me better than what he has given me (now) (18:35–36).

That arrogance is rewarded with ruin. After his gardens are gone and rivers dried up, the "wealthy" man cries out upon realizing the true state of things:

> (When) his fruits were encompassed (with destruction), he became (remorseful), wringing his hands due to (the labor) he spent. (His gardens) lay overturned. He said, "Oh! Had I never associated partners with my Lord!" (18:42).

Was the wealthy owner of the gardens static or dynamic?

Let's make this question a little bit more personal. Should every Muslim be a dynamic character?[32] When describing the kind of person that God forgives, he says,

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32. Please see point 4 in Appendix B for clarification of the word "character" being applied to real people.

> Except for those who repent, reform, and make (that reform) manifest; towards these (people) I turn in mercy. I ever accept repentance and bestow mercy (2:160).

Does that description describe a static or dynamic person? The word Muslim means "one who submits." Muslims should submit to the truth whenever it becomes apparent, always growing and refining ideas and behavior, staying away from what hurts our development and nearness to God. Someone might ask, "If a person is always trying to improve, doesn't that make him a static character since he's always doing the same thing?" Well, although someone is *always* bettering himself, his outlook and behavior change in the process—they evolve. He is definitely dynamic.

One of the clearest examples of a static character in the Quran is Satan. Think about how he isn't changing at all. From the time he was banished from God's presence for not bowing down to Adam till the Day of Judgment, does he change? Contrary to how a Muslim is described in 2:160, Satan does not repent, does not amend, and does not seek to do good.

Chapter 12 Proverbs and Idioms

Idioms are absolutely idiomatic. That's probably not a helpful description. Idioms are phrases that can be completely misdirecting, but only if you take them literally. When I tell you, "I'm pulling your leg," I'm not really pulling your leg. This idiom means that I'm joking with you. The meaning of any idiom is unique to the words it's made up of and the language and culture that it comes from. In Spanish I'd say, "I'm pulling your hair," to tell you that I'm joking! Now this is just a wild guess, but in Morocco the idiom probably goes, "I'm pulling your fez." Fez being the well-known hat worn in Morocco—I'll lay off on the bad jokes for now. I promise to try at least!

The Quran is bursting at the seams with idioms. In fact, a 400-page book, *Verbal Idioms of the Quran*, talks all about them.[33] Arabic is a language rich in poetry so this fact shouldn't be surprising. What makes these idioms even richer is that they contain so many symbols. Here's an example of a Quranic idiom. *Qurrat a'yun* literally translates to "coolness of eyes":

> And those who say, "Our Lord, make our wives and offspring a coolness of eyes and make us leaders of the righteous" (25:74).

Why would such an idiom be popular in Arabia? Imagine not just traveling but living day to day in an arid desert climate. How soothing and refreshing would any kind of coolness be? Imagine hot days so sweltering that the body guards every drop of moisture, including the moisture of your eyes. Now imagine an oasis of cool water, or a cool breeze, offering you coolness to your eyes—how relieving! Don't forget that the eye is also symbolic. It's our pathway to the world. By

33. *Verbal Idioms of the Quran* by Muntasir Mir discusses the many idioms in the Quran.

considering these points we can appreciate the "coolness of eyes" idiom a little better. The eye is not literally being cooled but the object we behold by our eyes is relieving, comforting, and delightful! That's just beautiful. The Quran's idioms are so stimulating!

"Lower the wing" is quite the colorful idiom in the Quran. Let's look at the context it's used in to glean what this idiom means:

> Lower the wing of humility to both (of your parents) with mercy and say, "'My Lord have mercy upon them just as they have nurtured me through youth" (17:24).

Using words like "lower" and "humility" in relation to how to treat your parents is a hint that "lowering the wing" means to be humble and kind. The wing is a symbol itself. It's a regal and mystic symbol that helps birds soar through the heavens. In this idiom, however, it's brought low—and for good reason. The image of a majestic wing lowered gently to honor your parents is magnificent!

Another symbolic idiom is *dhal ayd*, which literally translates, "one possessing the hand," and means, "one possessing strength" (38:17). Think of the symbolism of the hand and how it's a vehicle to transport your influence into the world.

You may have heard of the verse in the Quran about "cutting off the hands" of thieves (see 5:38). Remember that all of the Quran is connected, so to gain the most understanding of one verse, see what other verses say about the same subject. In verses 12:72–79, the penalty for a thief was to work off the debt for his crime.[34] So there are two verses speaking about the thief and his penalty. One is a

34. See 12:75 of Yusuf Ali's translation wherein Prophet Joseph's brothers say that the thief should work as a bondsman to atone for the crime. This translation is based on commentaries and inference from the surrounding verses, such as the suspect being "kept" with the authorities of Egypt, in this case Prophet Joseph, according to the "law of the King" in 12:76.

command and the other is a story of what happened to a person deemed a thief. Why would both ways to deal with a thief be mentioned? Could there be some interpretation that reconciles both verses? Also, why is there an idiom in the Quran about "possessing the hand?" Could "cutting off the hand" be connected to that? The following verse tells us the best way to judge for these kinds of questions:

> Those who listen to the speech (of the Quran) and follow the best (meaning) of it; they are those whom God has guided and those are people with understanding (39:18).

Listen to the Quran, consider all of its connected verses, then follow the best meaning. This is how God commands us to approach our understanding of this wonderful, holy book.

Now that we've better understood idioms, let's move onto proverbs. Proverbs are short, instructive sayings usually passed down through the wisdom of generations. "Eat to live and not live to eat" is an example of a proverb. Spotting proverbs in the Quran has always delighted me. Here's a proverb for you:

> "[. . .] Remember your Lord whenever you forget [. . .]" (18:24).

As soon as we forget God, we should remember him. This sounds a bit like a paradox. How could you forget God if you remember him as soon as you forget? Well, you can't. And that's the point. The message of this proverb is that we should *always* remember God. Isn't it grand? See? I told you these were delightful!

So we're told to always remember God, but aren't we a community of the middle way (2:143)? And aren't we supposed to take the middle course in all things (don't forget to notice the signs in nature; balance, the middle way, is a major characteristic of life)? Does that mean this is a contradiction? Nope. In terms of God's light,

there's no such thing as too much. God is beyond material analogy: we can eat too much of a kind of vegetable and suffer, we can read too much and hurt our eyesight, we can fast too much—we can even sing in the rain too much—but of remembering God, that we can never do *enough*.

The "remembrance of God" is essentially a state of mind that brings about good actions, like prayer and fasting.[35] If we're in the state of God-consciousness, we will seek out goodness; we will be humble, honest, and thankful. It's a state where the servant is in harmony with the will of his Creator. There can never be too much of this. Guaranteed!

Let's conclude this chapter with another delightful Quranic proverb, "When you are free from labor, then labor" (94:7). What are your thoughts? What could this possibly mean?

See you next chapter!

35. In the Quran, we see, "Read aloud what was inspired to you of the Book, and establish the prayer—for it certainly dispels shameful and objectionable deeds—but the remembrance of God, that is greater [. . .]" (29:45). How is the remembrance of God greater than prayer? Because it is the state of mind that gives rise to prayer. Recall the independent and dependent relationship of things. That which is independent is always greater.

Chapter 13 Cause and Effect

"Oh Cause and Effect. Wherefore art thou Cause and Effect?"

For those of you in love with cause and effect, you're in luck, because it will never leave your side. Cause and effect is literally everywhere! Just got soaked standing outside? The cause was the rain, and the effect was getting soaked. Just got a smile on your face? The cause was reading the Quran, and the effect was smiling. The only caveat to cause and effect is that you need inferences to figure them out. The inference can be simple or sophisticated. All the examples above involve pretty simple inferences. Understanding why your wife is irritated presents a question of cause and effect that most husbands can't answer. Just being real.

Playfulness aside, cause and effect help communicate serious matters. How did Adam fall from Heaven? He ate the forbidden fruit of the tree, right? But what caused him to eat the fruit? The cause was not Eve, as the Bible says. The Quran places the responsibility squarely upon the shoulders of both man and woman:

> Then Satan whispered to the two of them to expose what was hidden from them of their shame. He said, "Your Lord only forbade you both (from eating of) this tree to prevent you from becoming angels or of those who live forever" (7:20).

The cause of their fall is something exquisitely insightful. *Shaythan* convinces Adam and Eve to eat the fruit so they can transform into angels.[36] How could this line of reasoning be convincing? Let's put on our inference caps. Shaythan could only convince Adam to become something "better" if he first convinced Adam that he was deficient as God made him.

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36. *Shaythan* is the Arabic word referring to Satan.

This lends itself back to tawheed, the oneness of God. If God is one, he is perfect and complete in all of his attributes, especially as the Creator; for this reason, his creation must also be perfect and complete. When someone tells you that you are deficient, you aren't good enough, you can't understand, you can't make a decision on this, and so on, it is a clear ruse of the Satan. When we accept that our creation is deficient, we're also accepting that our Creator is deficient. The only possibility of committing *shirk* is to first see God as incomplete, as deficient.[37] Only then can a person associate anything with God to make him more "complete." This is such an important point, and I hope you think about it carefully.

In the context of the verse, Satan convinced Adam and Eve that they were deficient as God made them, and this opened up their fall from grace. They ended up following Satan's commands instead of following what they knew was right by God's inspiration. An important inference about cause and effect here is that if we ever accept that our creation is deficient (cause), we will commit shirk (effect).[38] As a quick note, the person or institution that aims to convince us that we're deficient is the very agency that seeks to share God's place in our lives. They do so in the form of some kind of control. Be conscious of this—most importantly, be conscious of God's oneness.

Cause and effect also point to one of the Quran's most important themes. That theme is accountability. Accountability means that there is an effect to our actions. For the arrogant in positions of power, the thought of being held accountable is repulsive. Such a person would rather believe that he can behave in whatever manner he wishes, that

37. *Shirk* is the Arabic word for associating partners with God's divinity.

38. For those of us with disabilities, when we do our utmost to function and excel within our capacity, praying and being constant in God, we are achieving perfection as God's creation. The struggles we go through in life direct us to what is truly important and lasting.

he is only accountable to his lusts, that his actions carry no just consequence whatsoever. It is in the best interest of his shame to reject accountability. “After we are dead and decayed bones, shall we really be raised up again (to be judged)?” he asks (37:16).

To accept accountability is to accept divine authority. This is an ultimate expression of cause and effect in the Quran and in our lives. Ameen.

Chapter 14
Patterns in the Brain and in the Quran

From your own reflection, or from the examples in this book, you have realized that the Quran is a network of interconnecting, repeating concepts. Why is the Quran designed this way? Because the human brain is designed this way. The brain is a network of interconnecting neurons in repeating patterns.[39] That is pretty neat. Remember that "form follows function." The way the brain is physically formed has a lot to do with the way it works.

As a teacher in an Islamic school, I often missed workshops. The irony betrays the truth.[40] There was a workshop on concept maps that I couldn't attend. The principal gave me the gist of it. Concept maps connect every concept in a subject together in a hierarchical and meaningful way. They show how everything fits: how concepts branch from one to the other and back again.

Concept maps put in diagrammatic form how the brain organizes and facilitates memory and learning. As Dr. Joseph Novak points out, "it seems evident [. . .] that our brain works to organize knowledge in hierarchical frameworks and that learning approaches that facilitate this process significantly enhance the learning capability of all learners."[41, 42, 43] Well, that was a mouthful. What the good doctor is

39. In describing the structure of the brain, neuroscientist Van Wedeen concludes that at a certain level of organization, "It's all grids." Carl Zimmer, "Secrets of the Brain," *National Geographic*, February 2014.

40. Being able to miss workshops was part of my contract. Lucky, I know. I was studying while working at that private school. Also, being good at negotiating didn't hurt.

41. Dr. Joseph Novak is a Senior Research Scientist at the Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition and the originator of concept maps.

saying is that the best way to teach human beings is by using methods that incorporate how the brain works. The brain works by making connections!

Isn't that how the Quran is set up? As the principal summarized the idea of concept maps, I interrupted her, "That's how the Quran is structured!"

The Quran is woven together by common, consistent threads. I shared verses 7:57–59 as an example, showing how the structure of the Quran reflects the structure of the brain's processing. Please see the concept map in Diagram 14.1 along with reading the following pages for more clarity:

> He is the one who *sends* the *winds* as *good news* before His *mercy* (arrives). When they bear heavy clouds, We drive them to a dead land and send down water, by which We produce every kind of crop; thus do We resurrect the dead. Perhaps you will remember (7:57).
>
> A good land produces good harvest by the will of its Lord, and that (land) which is corrupt produces only little. Thus do We posit our signs to a people that are grateful (7:58).
>
> We indeed sent Noah to his people. He said, "My people, worship God, you have no god except Him. I fear for you the penalty of a powerful day" (7:59).

These verses may seem disconnected, especially 7:58 and 7:59, as if jumping to an unrelated subject altogether. Far from it. Let's start by appreciating the connections. The winds are sent giving good news of

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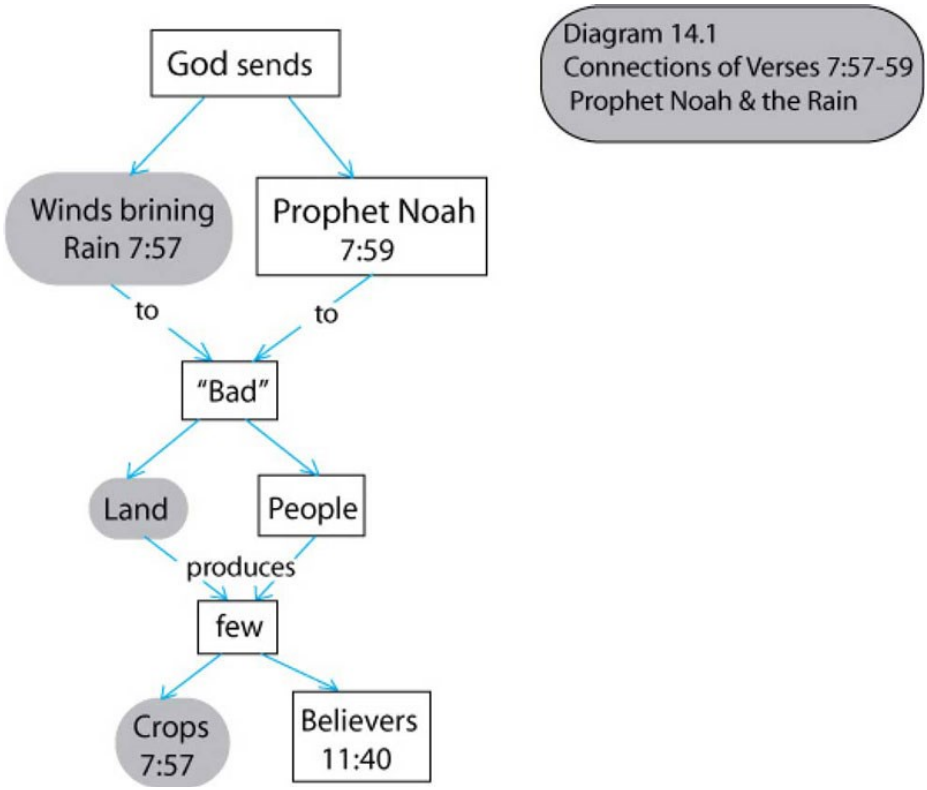
42. John Bransford et al. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999), cited in Joseph Novak et al., "The Theory Underlying Concept Maps and How to Construct Them."
43. Joe Z. Tsien, "The Memory," *Scientific American* (July 2007): 52–59, cited in Joseph Novak et al., "The Theory Underlying Concept Maps and How to Construct Them."

rain and mercy upon a dead land (7:57). When the rain is revealed upon a good land, it produces good harvest. When that land is bad, it produces very little (7:58). How is this connected to 7:59, a verse mentioning Prophet Noah being sent to his people? It is totally disconnected and shouldn't be here, right? Remember: God wants us to reflect.

Prophet Noah, like the wind, brings good news of mercy to his people. Whereas the wind brings rain to revive the dead land, Prophet Noah brings the revelation to revive a spiritually dead people. If the people are good, many will grow; but if the people are bad, there will be few. This describes Prophet Noah exactly. In 11:40, literally "only a few" of his people believed, just as with the "bad" land and "little" growth. See this simplified in Diagram 14.1. How beautiful and connected the Quran is!



This was just a brief overview. Let's appreciate the connections more thoroughly. To do so summarily, we will venture into Arabic grammar, looking at the roots of the words and how they connect to other concepts in the Quran. It's okay. I will be there with you. Hold my hand if you get scared of Arabic grammar!

Why are the words that God chooses so important?

> And He [God] proves the truth with His words though the wrongdoing may loathe it (10:82).

Words are chosen with a purpose. God doesn't do things just because. I will capitalize the letters of the Arabic roots in English so you can

follow all the connections better. The next paragraph is a little bit too tedious, so check out Diagram 14.2 for clarity.

In verses 7:57–59, we see the three-letter Arabic root R-S-L from which the words yuRSeLu (to send) and RaSooL (messenger) come; the root B-SH-R produces the words BuSHRaa (good news) and BaSHeeR (bearer of good news); R-W-H gives ReyaaH (winds) and has the same root as RooH (Spirit);[44] from the R-H-M root comes RaHMah (mercy) and RaHiM (womb); and from the N-Z-L root comes aNZaLa (send down/reveal) and taNZeeL (revelation). This paragraph is represented visually in Diagram 14.2.

44. The root for ReYaaH, RooH, and RaWH is R-W-H. In Arabic grammar, the W is at times substituted with a Y or other letters. This is a tremendously simplified statement so as not to go too far into Arabic grammar.

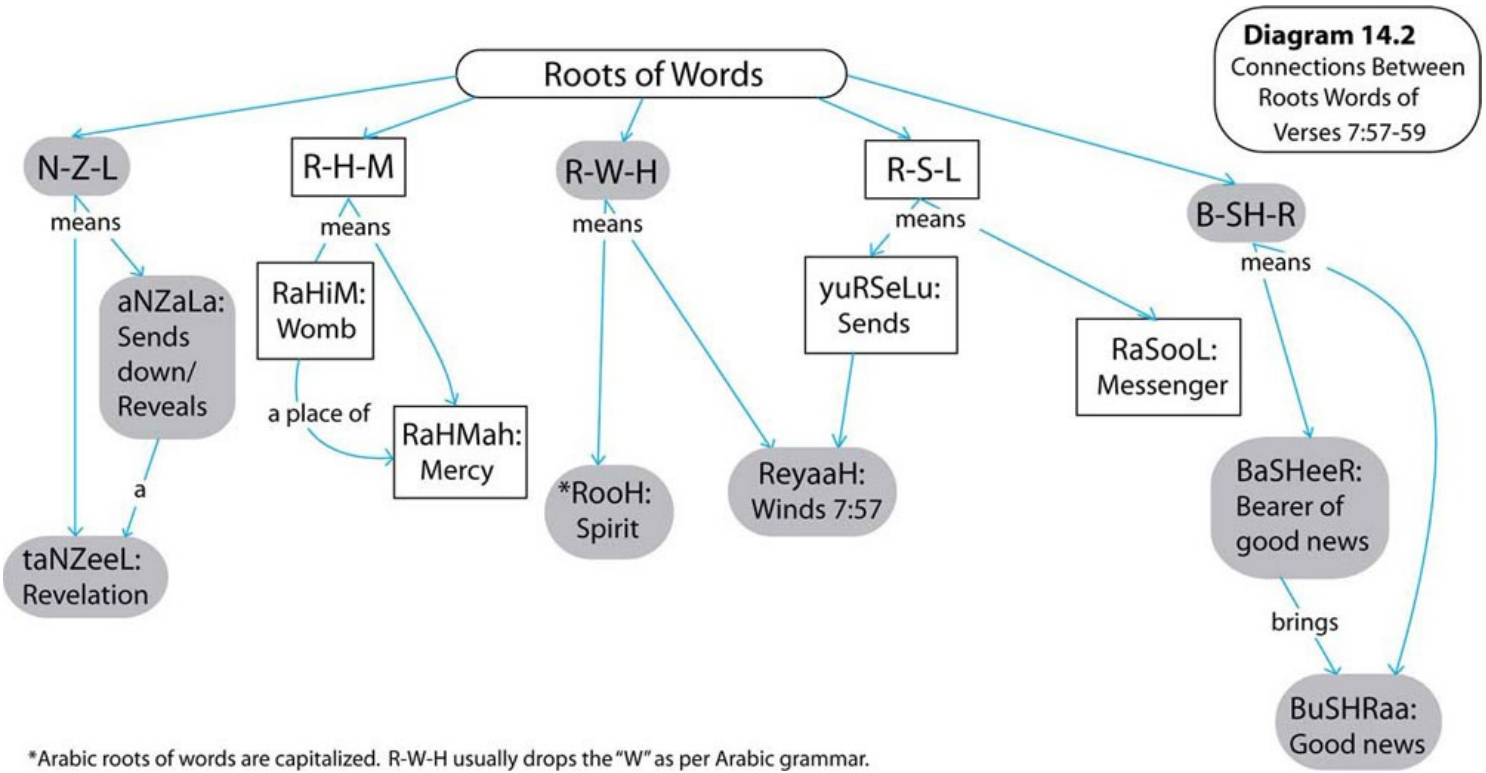


Diagram 14.2
Connections Between Roots Words of Verses 7:57-59

*Arabic roots of words are capitalized. R-W-H usually drops the "W" as per Arabic grammar.

Remember that connections are the very manner by which our brains learn, so let's move through each of the above connections carefully. The first connection is that Prophet Noah is like the wind. Both are "sent." The wind is a mercy. The same root for wind gives the word RaWH, which means soothing mercy and an evening breeze.[45] Prophet Noah is also a mercy. We infer this from the fact that other prophets, like Prophet Muhammad, are called a "mercy" (21:107). Also, the wind is a BuSHRaa (good news, 7:57), and Prophet Noah, like all prophets, is a BaSHeeR (bearer of good news) (35:24). The same root once again connects concepts that we would otherwise think aren't related. See Diagram 14.3 at the end of this chapter for a more detailed summary of these connections.

God sends the ReyaaH, the winds, which in turn send down aNZaLa, the rain.[46] Likewise, God sends the RooH ulqudus, Angel Gabriel, to bring down the taNZeeL, the revelation (17:106).[47] Notice how consistent both pairs of analogies and both pairs of roots are. The rain is a mercy (7:57) and so is the revelation—i.e., the Quran (6:154). The Quran is also BuSHRaa (good news) just the same. Check out Diagram 14.3 again if any of this was a little hazy.

We can delve deeper by exploring the connections between the Angel Gabriel, the prophets, and reviving the dead land. There's so much more if you put in the effort. Explore for yourself, appreciate the connections, and learn! Go above and beyond—grounded by solid evidence, of course!

Some criticize the Quran, claiming that it's a menagerie of stories, starting and stopping mid-stride, stirred incoherently through the whole book. Well, everything that seems disconnected is profoundly

45. See footnote 42 above.

46. This is simplified. The winds drive the rainclouds, and then the rain is sent down.

47. The RooH ulqudus, or Holy Spirit, is said to refer to the Angel Gabriel.

connected. Let's put on our inference caps and discover these beautiful connections for ourselves! God made the Quran this way to have the message penetrate our minds, to encourage us to think. This best complements the human brain because this is how our brains process information! Real learning, real growth, and a real relationship with our Creator is what this encourages.

> Had We sent down this Quran upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and split apart from fear of God. Thus do We provide examples to mankind so they may reflect (59:21).
>
> We have made the Quran quite easy to comprehend and remember; is there anyone that will benefit? (54:17, 54:22, 54:32, and 54:40).

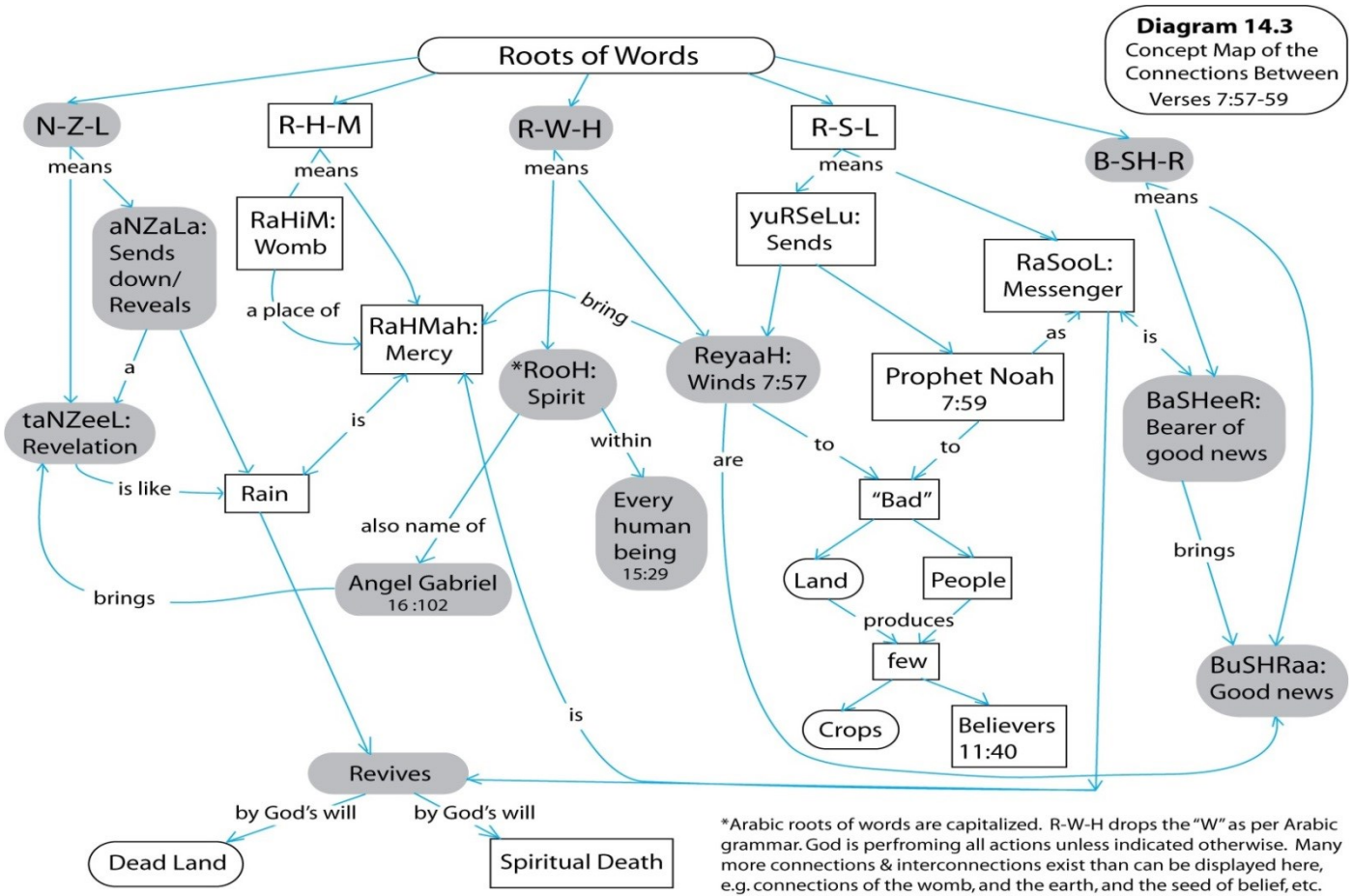


Diagram 14.3
Concept Map of the Connections Between Verses 7:57-59
Roots of Words
N-Z-L
R-H-M
R-W-H
R-S-L
B-SH-R
means
aNZaLa: Sends down/ Reveals
RaHiM: Womb
yuRSeLu: Sends
RaSooL: Messenger
a place of
RaHMah: Mercy
bring
*RooH: Spirit
ReyaaH: Winds 7:57
Prophet Noah 7:59
BaSHeeR: Bearer of good news
as
is
a
taNZeeL: Revelation
is
within
are
to
to
is like
Rain
Every human being 15:29
"Bad"
brings
also name of
Angel Gabriel 16 :102
Land
People
brings
produces
few
BuSHRaa: Good news
Crops
Believers 11:40
is
Revives
by God's will
by God's will
Dead Land
Spiritual Death
*Arabic roots of words are capitalized. R-W-H drops the "W" as per Arabic grammar. God is perfroming all actions unless indicated otherwise. Many more connections & interconnections exist than can be displayed here, e.g. connections of the womb, and the earth, and the seed of belief, etc.

Chapter 15 Conclusion

Literature is art. It's the art of communicating emotion, information, passion, guidance, sacredness, and beauty into the written word. The Quran is literature and so much more. Through "Experience the Symbolic Literature of the Quran," we've touched on the literary value of the Quran but every step of the way, through every literary element, God's message for our lives also presented itself. It's as if the Quran is an invitation to every reader of any persuasion, in this case a literary persuasion, to "Come and journey through my pages: reflect. You will find your fill of an infinite cup and more thought and healing than you ever sought."

Empowering our higher nature is one way the Quran offers healing for our hearts. By accepting the completeness of our Creator, we accept the completeness in his creation, and thus, in ourselves. We are in no way deficient or lacking. Use your God-given faculties; experience, think, and discover for *yourself*. Gain confidence in the leader God created *you* to be. By this, we can wash away the false labels we've identified ourselves with, labels that we acquiesced to or gave ourselves through "worldly-consciousness." These labels most often appeal to our lower nature. But any label that is dependent upon the material, like the label of football player or physician, patriot or politician, is ephemeral and ultimately false.

The truest label—independent of all material—that no person can take away is "Servant of God." This is our highest nature realized through God consciousness. This is ultimate empowerment. A direct, unencumbered relationship with God is his prescription for our healing. This is the path of *tawheed* and the message of the masterful literature of the Quran.[48]

48. *Tawheed* is the Arabic word for the oneness of God. It can also be described as the innate yearning for contentment, for harmony with his oneness. I realize that this word has been defined a few times already, but it's just that profound.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank God for his countless blessings, my mother being one of them. She has believed in me all of my life. I would also like to thank my wife who is always supportive; my friends, especially Reiza A., who provided valuable feedback that made this book much more engaging and fun; Adib S. who, many years ago, introduced me to the normalcy of symbolism in the Quran; and to you who are reading this book. May God's mercy spread wide over your hearts.

Further Reading

1. Please read the Quran. After you have read it, read it again and repeat indefinitely. You will always discover something new, especially as you grow as a human being and servant of God.

2. A friend has done a bit of research on Imam Warith Deen Muhammad's analysis of symbolism in the Quran. He shared some of the Imam's observations, and I was struck immediately by their power. If you would like to delve into the deep symbolism of the Quran, then reading Imam's Warith Deen Muhammad's profound reflections are encouraged.

3. If you would like to learn more about concept maps, visit: http://cmap.ihmc.us/.

Important Note:

> Be honest in your studies as you seek knowledge. Trust that your Lord will guide you to all the knowledge you need in your journey—whatever form it may take. Read God's signs.

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Appendix A

Evidence Supporting the Use and Interpretation of Symbols in the Quran

God tells us directly that the Quran contains symbolic language, and shows us through basic examples.

> He is the one who revealed the Book to you. It comprises verses that are unambiguous [*muhkamat*], they are the foundation of the Book, while others are unclear and allegorical [*mutashabehat*]. As for those in whose hearts is deviance, they follow what is unclear and allegorical thereof, seeking discord and its (absolute) interpretation. No one knows its (absolute) interpretation except God. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say, "We believe in it. The whole of (the Book) is from our Lord." Yet only those possessing intellect understand (3:7).

This verse tells us clearly that there's symbolism in the Quran, but there's an important point to note.

From reading this verse, you may think that interpreting the symbolism is forbidden. What's forbidden is the specific context above: ignoring the muhkamat verses in favor of the mutashabehat *with the intention to do harm*.

Remember this verse from earlier in the book:

> "Had We sent down this Quran upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and split apart from fear of God. Thus do We provide examples to mankind so they may reflect" (59:21).

We're told that the purpose of the allegories is for us to reflect upon them so they can literally engage our minds.[49] They also just happen to be a source of the Quran's beauty:

> We have revealed to you the most beautiful message, a book that is allegorical [*mutashabehan*] and repeating [...] (39:23).[50,51]

Far from being condemned, reflecting on the *mutashabehat* is a command from God. Seeking their deeper meaning allows us to experience the Quran's beauty firsthand. What's condemned is going to extremes, like only following one type of verse and disregarding the other.

---

49. The word for "examples" (*amthaal* in Arabic) in 59:21 is often translated as "similitudes/allegories." This is because the words *amthaal* and mutashabehat are closely related in meaning by their usage: the example/*amthaal* in 59:21 of a mountain crumbling to dust by the Quran being revealed on top of it is very much allegorical/mutashabehat. Additionally, the word for *examples*, amthaal, and the root of mutashabehat are used to describe each other: in 2:25 God says that the example, amthaal (singular *mathal*), of food given to the people of paradise with the food of this world is *mutashabehan*, (of which the word mutahsabehat derives). Thus, God connects the two words by calling the mutashabehan allegory in 2:25 a *mathal*/*amthaal* (2:26).

50. Ahsan can mean both "best" and "most beautiful."

51. Mutashabehan and mutashabehat are derivatives. One is an adjective form and the other a noun.

Appendix B

Miscellaneous Points of Clarification

Point 1. The English translation "God" is mainly used instead of "Allah" in this book.

> Say: "Invoke God or invoke The Gracious, whichever (name) you call upon (makes no difference), for His are the most beautiful names. And (when you pray) do not say your prayers too loudly nor too softly, but seek a middle path" (17:110).

To God belong the most beautiful names in Arabic as well as in English. Also, since English is spoken by the larger community here, any discussion of Islam, I believe, should be done in the language of that community since these discussions can also be used as outreach and an invitation. This is in keeping with the logic of verse 14:4. We should certainly speak in the language of the people we are discussing Islam with. The words God and Allah are only different by the interpretation of the person saying either. This is evidenced by the fact that Christian Arabic speakers use the word Allah to refer to their understanding of Jesus as God.

Point 2. To emphasize the Quran's verses, I usually separated them from the rest of the text when they were within a paragraph. This is done with large verses, as expected, and with most smaller verses as well. The citation format for most everything else follows the Chicago style. Also note that all numbers separated by a colon refer to the surah, or chapter, number and verse number of the Quran, respectively.

Point 3. The Quran translations used in this book are modern English versions that the author translated. The following were used as references: Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 10th edition, and Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Volumes 1-8.

Point 4. The term “character” is used loosely throughout this book. When applied to figures in the Quran or figures in our daily lives, it is not meant in the fictitious sense at all. Since we are using the Quran and literary analysis, terms for literary elements like “character” are used where using the word “person” or “leading role of the story” have been exhausted. For instance, when I say that every Muslim should be a dynamic character, I don’t imply at all that the person is fictitious.

Appendix C

No institution or individual you meet is always right. Only God is. When you fear mistakes so much that you let your life's journey be dictated by an institution, you only solidify a relationship with that institution. Our goal, however, is to explore our personal relationship with God. God is with us and is intimately helping us along this journey of ours—through our sincere mistakes and all. We just have to ask, and he will respond:

> And when my servants ask you of me, tell them I am very near. I answer their call when they call upon me. So let them respond to me and have faith in me so they may be rightly guided (2:186).

Praise is due God; may peace be upon all the prophets and messengers and all of humanity that stands for honesty, humility, and goodness.

For a version of this book teaching educators how to incorporate the Quran into their literature curriculum, please see *Teaching Literary Analysis Through the Quran for Private & Home School: A Primer.*

Please visit
www.ConfirmWithin.com
for more work from the author.

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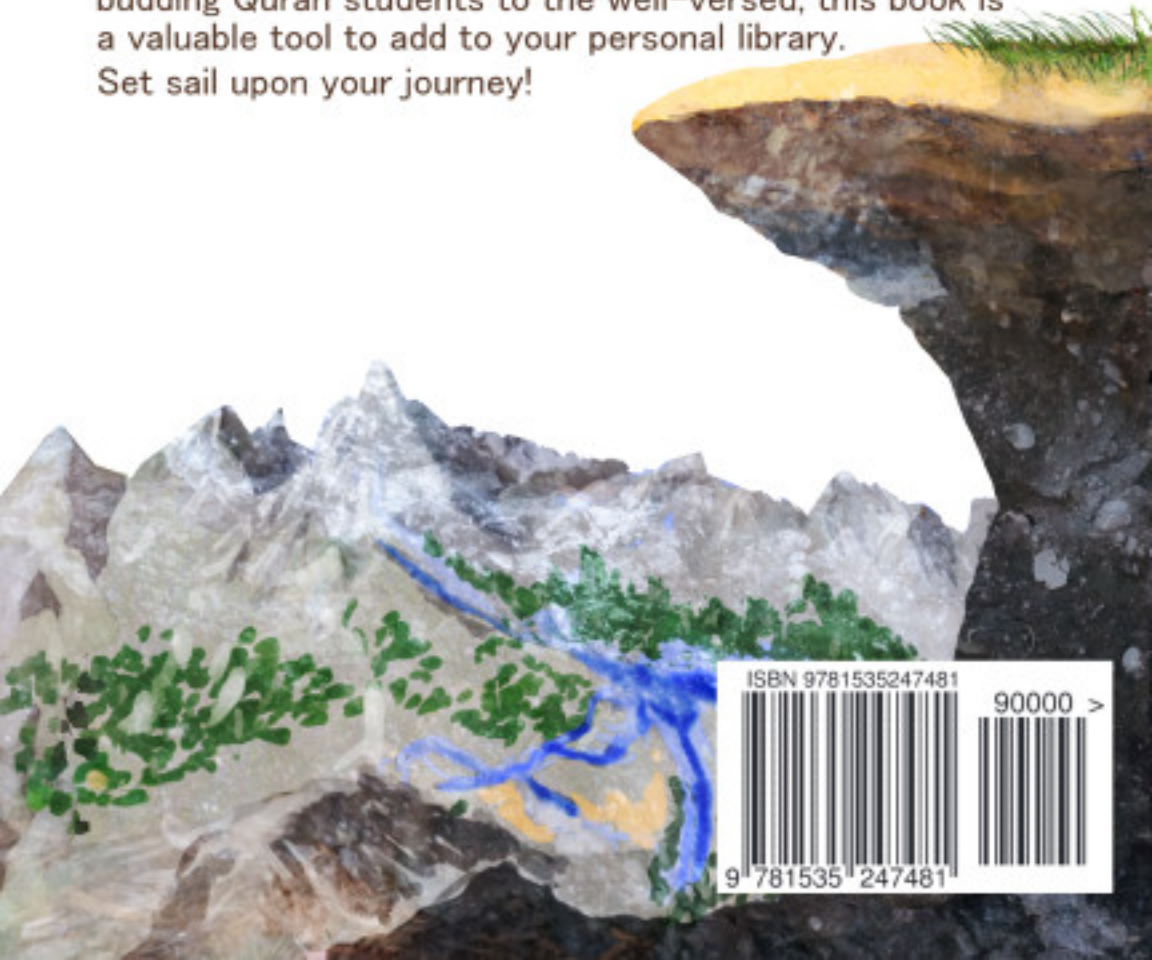
The Quran is a masterpiece of literary achievement. Its verses complement and interconnect, harmonize and expound upon each other in a divine symphony. Its intertwining patterns flow rhythmically through symbolism and instruction.

As you study a single verse, you set sail upon a journey; one verse unfolds into a timeless map—an ocean of wisdom contained within—charted by the entirety of the Quran itself.

Experience the Symbolic Literature of the Quran helps you experience this divine symphony of symbolic patterns, and the profound meanings they indicate, for yourself. From budding Quran students to the well-versed, this book is a valuable tool to add to your personal library.
Set sail upon your journey!



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